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# A SON OF AVSTERITY



BY  
*GEORGE KNIGHT*











Alice White.

Aug 20 - 1915





*A SON OF AUSTERITY*











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By GEORGE KNIGHT

*Frontispiece by HARRISON FISHER*

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**TO THE MEMORY OF**  
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*A SON OF AUSTERITY*



# A SON OF AUSTERITY

## CHAPTER I

### THE SHE-WOLF'S CUB

"My peace is gone  
And my heart is sore:  
I have lost him, and lost him  
For evermore.

"The place where he is not  
To me is the tomb,  
The world is sadness  
And sorrow and gloom."

The reader's voice was a penetrating baritone, sympathetic enough, though somewhat scantily modulated. He lay at full length on a truss of straw, with a paper-backed duodecimo between his elbows, while the afternoon sunshine picked him out of the dusk from an adjacent loophole. The ponderous murmur of uncouth machinery dwelt upon the air throwing into acoustic relief the words of Marguerite's lament—

"My peace is gone  
And my heart is sore,  
For lost is my love  
For evermore."



"Paul!"

The interpolated syllable, an utterance laden with anxiety and thrilling with tears, died unheard amid the somber vibrations which governed the student's ear. He went on, vaulting a quartette of stanzas—

"Far wanders my heart  
To feel him near,  
Oh! could I clasp him  
And hold him here.

"Hold him and kiss him—  
Oh! I could die  
To feed on his kisses  
How willingly."

"Paul!"

This second summons came—more distinctly—from the horizontal doorway of the shadowy loft.

The young man sprang to his feet.

"Mother? Good heavens! what has brought you up here? Is there anything the matter?"

Notwithstanding the title just given her, the woman who rose in the obscurity was totally unlike the speaker. Her face was a pronounced oval with steel gray eyes under the arched brows; his was square and angular, with deep, comprehending brown pupils. Time had added to this natural dissimilarity; the feminine head was almost white, its smooth tresses showing pathetically sparse against the high temples—the masculine was covered with a riotous array of crisp dark curls.

"There—there was no one about,"—she was answering evasively the least difficult of his questions—"and I wondered where you could be."

Her son's mind—still heavy with thought—did not perceive the curious inadequacy of the explanation. He held up the small volume.

"Goethe," he said. "I was thinking about you; shall I ever reconcile you to Marguerite's lack of spirit?"

The listener's teeth caught at her lip—the trembling mouth shut tightly, opened involuntarily as if to speak, then closed upon the vehement grasp of some recurring emotion.

Paul sat down again and fluttered the leaves, scanning a page here and there.

"Poor Marguerite," he murmured abstractedly; "she *was* rather a limp little soul."

His glance wandered from the book.

"Mother!—why, mother, what is the matter?"

She put out her hands toward him and the tears overflowed. Her answer was a species of sob.

"Paul," she said brokenly, "your—your father has come back."

Paul Gotch sat looking at her; the sunlight flooding over him into a pool of dancing yellow. His mouth softened to an expression of tender interest as he gazed at the fragile figure before him. Suddenly the eyes of mother and son met: the man's face fell vaguely. The woman saw it and understood. Nevertheless, she held her peace; she could do no other. Yet, on the instant,

her quivering features set in a cruel mask. From the lineaments of an experienced woman of middle age, they became those of a vixen of fifty. The rumble of the machinery below seemed to grow upon the senses of both until it was like the roar of Niagara. Presently Paul spoke—a subdued interrogation.

“He is sorry?”

It was an ungainly phrase, but the hard realism of his mother’s bearing forbade the use of superfluous rhetoric.

“Sorry!”

The word punctuated a forced nasal expiration that was a sneer run mad. Paul Gotch winced; he fingered the “Faust” in puzzled embarrassment.

Unexpectedly, Mrs. Gotch stepped forward, snatched the book from his hand, flung it down and stamped on it.

Her son bent and took it up. When he regained his former position his eyes were contemptuous and his nostrils dilated with the frigid anger of disgust. The two faces, fiercely antagonistic, gazed into each other; Paul began to straighten the crumpled volume.

“Sorry!” said Mrs. Gotch once more.

Paul devoted himself conspicuously to the damaged translation.

“And if he were sorry,” his mother flashed out, “what then?”

Paul Gotch squared his drooping shoulders.



"Nothing," he answered.

"Pshaw!" retorted Mrs. Gotch, bitterly; "do you think I don't know what you mean? You set more store by a lot of rubbish you've read in those books of yours than you do by all my years of starving and struggling. That's why you sympathize with him. Ah, you're his son, after all; his own son, core-through!"

Paul Gotch raised his head and his jaw fixed. The muscles at the angles thickened into fleshy swellings, so brutal was the strain put upon them. His mother repaid this physical demonstration of revolt with a stare of virulent disdain, and the *ensemble* of both countenances became inhuman in the extreme. Cynicism sprang to the man's rescue.

"I suppose the wanderer has asked to see me," he suggested; "is that it?"

Mrs. Gotch trembled with passion.

"You surely don't imagine he's here for my sake," she snapped.

Regardless of the gibe, Paul began to descend the hidden stairway. He halted abruptly, and returned, his face alight with a dreamy simplicity.

"What is my father like?" he inquired.

His mother lifted her hand, and struck him upon the cheek—a desperate, vicious blow, that stamped a quadruple bar of scarlet on a saffron ground. Paul's clenched fingers leaped to a level with his elbow; then dropped.

"I think you forget yourself," he observed, icily.

Mrs. Gotch shrank back, aghast at her own action, and her son, crossing the rickety floor with savage strides, disappeared in the twilight of the awkward exit. His mother followed him.

The apartment below was windowless; but a wide opening in one of the rough board walls served the double purpose of door and casement. From its sill, a long slope of wooden beams sank to an irregular stretch of muddy clay, and upon the thwarts of the slope a narrow-gauge railway had been built. A rusty chain came up the incline, met a couple of giant pulleys, and plunged into the engine-room underneath. To its farther extremity a laborer was attaching a squat tip-wagon piled with masses of clay. The horse that had dragged it from the point where the clay was in process of "getting," stood dejectedly by. On all sides the brickfield rolled its solitary acres to the distant ring-fence of suburban roofs. Within the upper story of the engine-house a huge hopper pierced the planking, and into its battered funnel a slothful attendant shoveled, periodically, the disgorgings of the tip-wagons.

Mrs. Gotch hurried down the artificial declivity that afforded the only means of access or departure. Her son availed himself of it for a few yards, and then leaped into the ruddy mire of the clay bottom. They met at the base of the slope, and mounted together the acute scarp that led to

a trapezium of unspoiled turf, whereon was perched a single white cottage. A low green fence surrounded it; it had green window-shutters, and a shallow porch of green trellis. The conventional flower-beds in the cramped garden were thronged with double daisies—pink, yellow and blue.

On the threshold Mrs. Gotch spun about.

“Mind you,” she said, vindictively, “go with him if you want to.”

Paul Gotch laughed easily; he had recovered his *savoir-faire*.



## CHAPTER II

### THE INDISSOLUBLE PARTNERSHIP

IN the front parlor of the white cottage a man was striding up and down—half a dozen steps one way, half a dozen the other; fitfully, like a caged animal. The room was low-ceiled and unsymmetrical, but substantially—even handsomely—furnished. A thick Brussels carpet covered the floor; the chairs, the sofa, and the revolving book-case in the window-bay, were of heavy mahogany—the two former upholstered in maroon leather—and a few pictures, unambitious enough, yet well-chosen, hung against the walls. These latter were further diversified by fixed book-shelves, brackets, and dependent pottery.

Upon a round, four-legged table of black oak, pushed toward one of the flanking sashes, a large silver ink-stand made a glittering island in the midst of a sea of disordered literature—volumes opened and closed, magazines, newspapers, and folios of soiled manuscript. Before this monumental confusion, the walker finally halted. He was a person of medium height, agile in his movements, and powerfully, though compactly built.

His hair and closely-cropped beard were thickly sprinkled with gray, and the irises of his somewhat diminutive eyes were a pale neutral tint, splashed with vivid orange. His mouth was selfish, and, by reason of a protruding nether lip, sensual to boot. Lounging at the table-edge, he lifted a batch of scrawled sheets and investigated them musingly.

“‘The Economic Interpretation of History—Notes on Thorold Rogers.’ Bah! ‘The Ethical Standards of Certain Poets;’ ‘Beatrice Cenci and the Instinct of Revenge in Woman.’ Good Lord!” he commented, “what a queer lodger Selina must have hooked! Some literary card, I suppose. Poetry, too!”—he was still wading through the heterogeneous mass—“Hullo!”

He had fallen upon a slip of paper crowded with a laboriously legible caligraphy. It was inscribed—

TO ONE GOTCH, UNKNOWN.

The succeeding lines ran from a penciled margin—

“And Abraham begat,” saith Holy Writ,  
“Isaac, and Isaac Jacob;” naught is told  
Of those whose troth was plighted with these old  
Departed heroes, whose sweet lives were knit  
With their sons’ grandsons, and whose subtle wit  
Made mighty statesmen of their “valiant mold”—  
Dames whose full tide of virtuous crimson rolled  
In her pure veins that nursed the Infinite.

"The complement hereof Fate dealt to me,  
For I, that am not all my mother's child,  
Seeing my will is calm and hers is wild—  
If I should question how I came to be,  
(I am that living soul for evermore)  
Do find this only: "And Selina bore."

The reader's brows contracted and his mouth twitched.

"Ha-ha!" he murmured craftily; "so this is the child's work—a clever lad, and curious about his father. That is why Selina didn't want him to see me. Very well, Selina!"

He drew out a swollen pocket-book, folded the copy of the sonnet, and insinuated it into one of the flat compartments. After which he chose a seat, reached his umbrella from the corner, put it between his knees, clasped his fingers over its buckhorn crutch and leaned his jaw upon his knuckles. All was very quiet, save for the pervading tattoo of the mill that beat the clay into an interminable slab for cutting. Soon the listener was aware of footsteps in the passage without and his face sharpened. A fugitive anxiety flitted across it as he diagnosed the firm self-possession of a tread that was not his wife's. Howbeit, when the door opened to admit Selina Gotch and her son, his expression had become one of thoughtful, almost listless, composure.

As they entered the room he rose, and put out his hand—not effusively, the cold eyes had been too perspicacious for that, but soberly and with diffidence.



Mrs. Gotch sneered as she comprehended her husband's rapid discernment.

Paul made no response to the proffered salutation. His mother caught her breath.

Gotch the elder turned to his wife, skilfully disguising the unreciprocated gesture.

"So this is our son, Selina," he said.

"This is the son that as an unborn child you deserted," retorted Mrs. Gotch, implacably.

Two of the three were studying the third—they were Gotch the elder, and his wife, Selina. One, and that one Paul himself, was contemplating the shrewd, authoritative face of the man who had just claimed to be his father.

The youngest of the trio spoke first.

"What is your Christian name?" he asked.

"Christopher," replied the other; "what is yours?" Mrs. Gotch answered the inquiry.

"Paul," she said, exultantly.

Her husband felt the point of her triumph.

"I am sorry you didn't call him after me," he owned; "but there, I didn't deserve it."

"I should think you didn't," assented Selina Gotch, viciously.

The visitor bent his head with an air of affected humility. His wife flamed into impotent rage at his astuteness.

"Oh, you disgusting hypocrite," she cried.

The son intervened.

"Won't you sit down?" he said.

Christopher Gotch acted on the suggestion, and

knitting his fingers over his umbrella, propped his chin upon them as before. Paul took a lounge that was set over against his father's chair, and leaned back in it; Mrs. Gotch stood bolt upright, quivering with the extremity of her jealous suspense.

"My mother," began Paul, directing his remark to the vigilant figure opposite, "has naturally given me some account of your conduct towards her." He might have been dictating to an amanuensis, so expressionlessly level were his tones. "But," he went on in the same peculiar fashion, "I have come unavoidably to regard with a certain distrust her recollection of any event which may have involved a serious personal equation."

Gotch the elder was perplexed by his son's judicial manner. Nevertheless, he gathered, though tardily, the significance of the latter's stilted exordium, and shot a stealthy glance at his wife. She was livid with resentment.

"Of this distrust," continued Paul, "it is perhaps only fair that you should have the benefit—unlikely as it is that in the present case the really material facts can be challenged. However, will you have the goodness to answer deliberately the questions I am about to put to you?"

Christopher Gotch gasped, recovered his breath, considered the apathetic pose of his inquisitor, and replied in the affirmative.

"Thank you. Question number one is this: You are legally married to my mother?"

Gotch the elder reviewed the situation, and decided upon candor.

"That is so," he admitted.

Paul proceeded.

"I am told that you left her six months after the wedding. Is that also true?"

Christopher Gotch coughed.

"Well——" he fenced.

"Yes or no, please," desired the querist, abruptly.

The response came at last; it was not a denial.

"You knew that she was friendless?"

"I should not have called her so," objected the other.

"Name to me any one friend to whom she could have applied for aid."

There was no answer.

"You knew," added the young man, "that her marriage had alienated her from her only living relative?"

"I hoped," said his father, gently, "that my departure would have paved the way to their reconciliation.

"You were acquainted with her father?"

"Slightly."

"Did you ever discover anything in his character which might have justified your entertaining such a hope?"

Christopher Gotch remained mute. Paul shifted his position and pursued his interrogatories.



"Do you know where I was born?"

His father shivered. "Not in—the——?"

Paul finished the sentence without altering the singular monotone of his voice.

"In the work-house."

The color was coming back to the face of Selina Gotch. She stepped forward that she might see the countenances of both men.

"Had you any reason," demanded Paul, ruthlessly, "for supposing that I would be born anywhere else?"

Christopher Gotch flushed crimson.

"I thought I should be able to send money," he stammered.

"You knew that the rent of your house was even then in arrears, and that the landlord was a grasping usurer."

The impeachment went by default—there was no disclaimer.

"Had you any means of ascertaining my mother's future address?"

Silence.

"Had she any means of communicating with you?"

Still silence, broken by an expiration of pleased malice from Mrs. Gotch.

"You have made no sign these five-and-twenty years; why are you here now?"

The baited sinner glanced piteously at his wife.

"I—I have explained," he said; "I am—sorry—for the past. I am rich, too; I can atone."

Paul smiled sadly.

"Is that your only motive?"

"My only motive."

The inquisitor accepted the assurance.

"You will be pleased to hear that we have been fortunate. My grandfather died intestate—these works are my mother's. We have all we want."

Christopher Gotch sighed.

"I—I am very lonely," he confessed.

Involuntarily Selina drew nearer to her son. A short step more would have brought her between him and her husband.

The pensive smile flickered about Paul's mouth.

"And so," he interpreted, "you have come courting my mother over again."

"Yes," answered Christopher Gotch, unsteadily.

"It's a lie," cried his wife insanely, "it's a lie, Christopher; you want the boy, you know you want the boy."

She clenched her hands as though to strike him; her thin bosom rose and fell convulsively.

Paul surveyed them a moment.

"I suppose that is so?" he inquired.

The full lips of Christopher Gotch worked under his gray mustache. He looked troublously at the two—the woman who had grown old in his absence, the child to whom he was a stranger.

"After all," he said, "you are my son."

"I am much more my mother's," replied Paul, impassively. "Your life is in my brain, I suppose, but her blood is in my veins. She bore me in a work-house hospital; she did the work of a menial that I might become a scholar; she has given me out of her prosperity as freely as she gave to me out of her adversity. And now you come to me and ask for a share in me, who am wholly her property. Tell me, would it be just to grant it you?"

"Just?" muttered Christopher Gotch, "just?—no, it would not be just."

His son made an expressive motion—as of dismissal.

An odd gleam sprang into the other's eyes, and he turned to his wife.

"Selina," he remarked, banteringly, "has the lad a sweetheart?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Gotch.

Her husband repeated the words mockingly.

"Certainly not," he mused, "certainly not! No, of course, it would not be just."

"Why wouldn't it?" parried Mrs. Gotch.

"You have done so much for him," expounded Christopher Gotch, "a sweetheart would have done nothing for him. Yet, if he had one, he would love her better than you. That would not be just."

"You have wronged us actively," demurred Paul, seizing upon the point.

"True," conceded his father; "you have a log-



ical mind, my son. But I, who have wronged you, only wanted a little of your love; when you get a sweetheart you will take all your love from your mother, who has done so much for you, and you will give it all to the girl."

"That is silly," declared Paul, ruffled; "the question is not of love, but of the most elementary justice."

Gotch the elder rose, took his hat and crossed the room.

"Good-bye, Paul," he observed; "you are a very Solomon. Good-bye, Selina; I am sorry there are so many pretty girls in the world. The Gotches are an impressionable stock. Good-bye again; I can find my own way out."

As the sound of the escaping latch on the outer door came to their ears, Paul spoke to his mother.

"I didn't expect any one like that," he said.

"No," returned his mother, dubiously.

"No"—he was revolving the concluded incident in his mind; "but my father is clearly no fool."

While Selina Gotch pondered this negative verdict Paul settled himself at the round table. His mother swerved from her thoughts, comprehending, with a sudden painful pleasure, that the battle was over, and that victory remained with her. Her pulses quickened as she looked at her apparently pre-occupied son; an awkward tenderness shook her worn frame.

"Would you like some tea, Paul?" she asked nervously.

The young man raised his head, a suppressed smile in the depths of his brown pupils.

"I think I should," he decided, upon reflection.

Mrs. Gotch set about preparing the suggested meal. Practical ministry is the one refuge of inarticulate spirits.

When he was alone the student abandoned his seat and peered cautiously through the flimsy curtains of the bay window. Christopher Gotch was just ascending the steep counter-slope which led from the muddy bottom of the vast and tortuous trench that cleft the broken meadow. He had evidently rejected the simplest means of exit from the brickfield—a wide cinder-path running east and west. Paul watched him out of sight, and then went back to the round table.

Unconscious of his son's surveillance, Christopher Gotch gained the summit of an elongated hillock, and following its sharp sow-back, passed from the scope of Paul's vision. At a convenient spot he paused to survey the surrounding country.

On his left was the solitary cottage, elevated, with its trim garden, upon an expanse of ragged turf; on his right the grouped outbuildings of the "works," the double stories of the engine-house dominating the low roofs of the drying-sheds. Behind him, half a mile away, one high-road skirted the rolling acres of plastic earth, sprinkled here and there with matted grass and

lusty dandelion flowers. In front, at the same distance, was another and busier thoroughfare, and on it, at the northeast limit of the clayfield, a church with a lofty spire—a spire delicate and soaring beyond the common, rich with pinnacle and crocket, and carried upon a splendidly ornate tower.

Gotch the elder paid but scant heed to this symbol of passionate aspiration, being engaged in estimating the yearly income and capital value represented by the neighboring brickworks and messuage. “Selina has not done badly,” he told himself. For a while he seemed lost in contemplation, then rousing, strolled toward the adjacent engine-house and outbuildings.

Upon the side nearest to him was a range of fires—sacred to the drying-sheds. An open well lay in front of it, and at the farther side of the shallow ditch a row of furnaces gleamed through the skirts of their iron doors. Above, the oblong blocks of steaming clay were laid in serried thousands upon the hot pavement. One man wrought in the well to keep the fires going; another stood upon its edge and leaned meditatively against a pillar that stayed the roof.

This latter was a surprisingly short and sturdy fellow, with a dense black beard, and sloe-black eyes. He was taking rapid stock of the newcomer, of his silk hat, of his silver-mounted umbrella, of the diamond and chrysoberyl ring upon his little finger.

This profound regard did not in the least embarrass its object, who moved on calmly, viewing the plant and buildings as he went with tolerant interest. The dwarf changed his position, the better to continue his scrutiny.

"Yon's mair than a look o' the young master," he muttered; "I'm thinkin' he'll be sib to'm."

Christopher Gotch disappeared, continuing his circular tour of inspection. A shrill sound startled the brooding Scot—the unnatural call of the steam-whistle. The end of the working-day had arrived.

The stoker got out of his pit and approached the dwarf.

"Who goes on after me to-night, **Mr. Cary?**" he asked.

The foreman named the relief. "Has he no come?" he inquired.

The reply was in the negative.

"I'll send ye a man roond," said the Scot, and strode off, walking fast but clumsily. As he stepped free of the obscuring block he saw that the person who bore so notable a resemblance to Paul Gotch was lounging westwards through the amber radiance of the setting sun.



## CHAPTER III

### PORTIA

PATRICK STUART, vicar of St. Faith's, sat in his library. Before him lay a pile of quarto sheets, closely covered with heavy yet fretful handwriting, not unlike mediæval text. The first of the folios bore the inscription—

EZEKIEL XXVIII, 2,

and the motto—

“Thou art a man and not God, though thou set thy  
heart as the heart of God.”

Opposite the vicar, as he sat at a pretentious rosewood escritoire, were a couple of French casements. Through one of these he could discern the Gothic tower of his church, its aërial spire truncated by the lintel of the window, and silhouetted against a low moon. He looked out at the soaring structure, sighed gustily, and gathered the blotted pages together. He had finished his sermon, and the physical chill that follows hard upon inspiration was beginning to lay hold of him. As he slipped the completed essay into a worn morocco “back”—heir to so many pre-

meditated harangues—the folding doors at the farther extremity of the room yawned by circumspect installments.

Patrick Stuart glanced up.

“Come in, dear,” he said tenderly; “I have finished now.”

A little figure stepped forward—a figure that had the stature of a child, with the mature, though blemished, outlines of a woman. As she came faltering towards him with the cautious footsteps of the blind, the rays from the vicar’s reading-lamp shone upon her face—pure Greek, with sightless violet eyes and a quivering, sensuous mouth. A deep cape of scarlet—the upper portion of some stage-doctor’s robes—hung down to the hem of her skirt, and her chestnut hair was put up in a coronet of braids beneath a scholar’s cap.

Patrick Stuart’s face lit with surprise.

“What *have* you been doing, my darling?” he asked gently.

“Do I look pretty?” queried his visitor.

The question hurt—there was not much beauty in the stunted form and crooked shoulders. But, at the crisis of his hesitation the vicar’s gaze traveled to the exquisite features, and marked, with a novel attention, the lustrous purple orbs, and the palpitating, rose-leaf flush upon the transparent skin.

“Very pretty, my child,” he answered, and spoke the truth.

"Pretty like other women?" insisted the elfish mortal.

Patrick Stuart winced at the impending decision. He fingered his handsome Vandyke beard, of golden brown.

"Of course, dear," he assured her.

"Justine did me this way," went on the inquirer; "she says I am Portia now—Portia in the 'Merchant of Venice'; we found the things up-stairs."

The vicar's brows wrinkled irritably, but he made no response.

"Justine says," pursued the imaginary Venetian, "that this cloak of mine is red. You tell me what red is."

Patrick Stuart was thrown upon that afflicted worthy who conceived scarlet as resembling the sound of a trumpet, but waived the subtle comparison.

"I do not think I could make you understand," he said, almost brusquely, sighing, for the hundredth time, at the psychological barrier between his daughter's mind and his own.

The quaint one came forward, and, kneeling at his feet, burst unexpectedly into tears.

"Dearie," it sobbed, "I am so lonely."

The vicar's eyes moistened, and he put an arm about her.

"Poor little Elsie," he muttered huskily—"father is very thoughtless."

The cap had fallen from the chestnut locks, and the smooth, pale forehead gleamed in the lamp-light.

Suddenly the tears stanchcd, and the sensitive lips ripened into a feminine pout.

"Say I am *very* pretty," was their petition.

Patrick Stuart's nostrils dilated momentarily; a gesture of displeasure, even of contempt, at the obsession.

"Very," he returned dryly.

Elsie held up a blue-veined wrist. A slender bracelet was clasped upon it—a bracelet that mounted a single giant ruby. Patrick Stuart recognized the jewel as an artificial one—recognized it merely by virtue of a previous acquaintance, the paste was too good for extempore detection.

"This is pretty, too, isn't it?" inquired the wearer of the bracelet, touching the mimic gem. "Justine says it is like fire, only it won't warm one; but it is like fire when it is red—red like my cloak. And the bracelet is pretty, too," she ran on, "like a ring. See, I can move my fingers round and round it, and never come to the end."

She thrust the ornament back into its place, and sitting down upon the floor, leant against her father's chair.

"What have you been writing about?" she asked; "tell me, Dearie, it's nice to know before any one else."



The vicar took out his manuscript and read the text aloud.

"Oh!" observed Elsie, discontentedly; "about God again!"

"S-s-sh! darling," said her father, a rebuke in his voice.

"Well," persisted "Portia," "I'm tired of hearing you preach about God. Why doesn't He speak to me as well as to you? Is it because I can't see?—you say you can't see Him; I don't understand."

The vicar cleared his throat; Elsie comprehended the motion.

"No, don't tell me now," she commanded; "I know I'm stupid, but I hate to be explained to—sometimes. Go on about the sermon."

Patrick Stuart reviewed the tenor of his proximate deliverance.

"It is about the essential futility of ambition," he began, stiltedly, epitomizing the drift of the discourse—"there is no limit to the desire of the human spirit, but that desire is, in its essence, impossible of attainment. Human ambition is infinite—human capacity is finite. The tireless pertinacity with which some men—Napoleon, for instance—have pursued their aims, lends a fictitious divinity to their characters. But, after all, their hearts were the hearts of men, though for years, it may have been for the best part of a lifetime"—the epitome was becoming hopelessly

lame, it beat a hasty retreat to the text—"they set their hearts as the heart of God:"

"What is the heart of God?" propounded Elsie.

The vicar pursed his mouth.

"It is a figurative expression," he returned, "for the Divine Individuality—that in the Omnipotent which most nearly approaches personality in man."

"What is the Divine Individuality?" pursued Elsie, ignoring the explanatory clause of her father's last sentence.

Patrick Stuart hesitated.

"Is God someone?" demanded the critic.

"N-not exactly," confessed the vicar, startled by his own candor.

Elsie sniffed.

"It seems to me," she said languidly, "that you don't know much more about God than I do."

She got up and marched over to a settee, in whose depths she buried herself.

"I'm going to sleep," she announced.

The vicar took up a pen and some note-paper.

Half an hour later there was a tap at one of the French windows. Patrick Stuart rose and withdrew the catch. Paul Gotch stood without.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Unsociable being!" bantered the vicar. "Yes, I am alone, saving Elsie's presence. But she is asleep, poor little girl!"

Paul stepped into the room—a spacious, oak-

paneled apartment, with an octagonal oratory, built out from an abbreviated corner.

"Sit down," said Patrick Stuart, hospitably, and, closing the window, returned to his comfortable position.

The other flung himself into a basket-chair and crossed his legs.

"Anything new?" inquired the vicar.

Paul Gotch yawned.

"A hitherto defaulting ancestor of mine," he remarked quizzically, "has taken unto himself flesh and blood and submitted them for my approval."

"Good heavens!" said Patrick Stuart, "you don't mean that your father——"

"Exactly," interrupted the son of Christopher Gotch.

"Dear me!" commented the vicar, falling into an exclamatory climax; "and may I ask——?"

"What I thought of him?" concluded Paul. "By all means: he is a man rather like myself, I fancy—he came out of the affair very cleverly."

"And your mother?"

Paul laughed—not unkindly. "Objurgatory to a degree," he answered.

Patrick Stuart nursed his ankle. "Did—did anything happen?" he ventured.

"N-no," decided the narrator thoughtfully. "I was obliged to present my ancestor with his passport. There was no sputtering; he saved me the trouble of conducting him to the frontier. I had

to try to sentence him almost impromptu, however, and with my nerves shattered by a previous interview with my mother. You know my fondness for the chiaroscuro of a hayloft?"

The vicar assented.

"She came to inform me of my father's arrival," explained Paul, "and mounted to the dim recess where Dobbin's bedding and provender are stored. Dobbin is our horse-of-all-work, an elderly, inoffensive animal, long since reconciled to Cary's tip-wagons. When my mother found me I was reciting 'Faust' from a divan of straw. I must have betrayed an undue interest in my long-lost father; her jealousy caught fire, and we had—a scene. The wanderer's return had driven her to the verge of hysteria; unwittingly I precipitated it, with startling results."

Paul screwed himself down into the lounge.

"I suppose wife-desertion is an unpardonable sin," he observed, with a tentative air.

"I should say so," pronounced Patrick Stuart, meditatively.

"So should I," agreed Gotch the younger, in the same doubtful fashion.

The vicar looked at him swiftly and began upon a question.

"Is your——?"

"My ancestor," suggested Paul.

"Yes—is he well-to-do?"

"He said as much," was the reply, "and somehow I believed him."



"Did he—did he make any overtures to—to your mother?" asked Patrick Stuart.

"I believe not." Paul Gotch smiled grimly.

"What was the object of his return?"

Paul touched himself on the breast and the vicar nodded, comprehending.

The two men relapsed into silence; the plight of Christopher Gotch was not without its appeal to their masculine souls.

At last Paul spoke out of his reverie, the controlling thought expressing itself in an abstracted sentence.

"They must have loved each other—once," he murmured.

"Who?" asked Patrick Stuart—albeit he knew.

"My father and mother," said Gotch. "It was very strange to see them, Mr. Stuart—how strange I can not describe. I am because what has been has been. Not all the desertions in the world can undo me; not eternity can undo me—as we believe. And to-day—you should have seen my mother's face."

The vicar's glance met that of Paul Gotch, and he moved his head sympathetically.

Paul leaned forward—a sudden excitement dissolving his assumption of cynical indifference.

"Of course she was in the right," he went on, "but do you know of what it reminded me?"

Patrick Stuart made a negative sign. He was gazing curiously at the shining eyes and working

countenance. Paul Gotch answered him with a fierce energy.

"That speech of Lucifer in Mrs. Browning's 'Drama of Exile,' " he said; "you know it—

'Countless angel-faces still and stern  
 Pressed out upon me from the level heavens  
 Adown the abysmal spaces and I fell,  
 Trampled down by your stillness and struck dumb  
 By the sight within your eyes—'twas then I knew  
 How ye could pity, my kind angel-hood.' "

The vicar shook his head dissentingly. "The appeal *ad misericordiam*," he objected; "that appeal can be made on behalf of a martyr or a gallows-bird—it is pathetic *per se*."

He was interrupted by a faint crooning sound, that slipped insensibly into actual melody and articulate utterance. It came from the couch where Elsie lay—to all appearance sound asleep. A fold of the scarlet cloak covered the lower part of her face—the heavy ring of yellow metal had fallen from her childish wrist and lay upon the floor, its blood-red ornament burning in the lamp-light—a symbol of human passion jewel-like eternity.

The words that came to the ears of the two men were strangely apposite—they wedded themselves to an old and grieving air—

"Oh, waes me for the 'oor, Willie,  
 When we thegither met,  
 Oh, waes me for the time, Willie,  
 That our first tryst was set.

"Oh, waes me for the loanin' green  
Where we were wont to gae,  
And waes me for the destinie  
That gart me luve thee sae."

The vocalist stopped abruptly.

"What a remarkable thing," whispered Paul Gotch, "to sing in one's sleep!"

Patrick Stuart smiled.

"Elsie is a veritable witch," he answered, lowering his own voice. "Whether she is asleep or not, neither you nor I will ever be quite certain."

"That is part of a wonderful Scotch poem," observed Paul Gotch, in the same fashion; "I have heard Cary recite, and what is more tragic still, sing it. But how did *she* come to know it?"

"*Sh-h-h!*" warned the vicar, "she is indisputably awake now."

The demure figure, half-woman, half-child, had risen to its feet, and stood sightlessly regarding them.

"Good-evening, Mr. Gotch," observed Elsie, "you see I have been making a fool of myself—or rather Justine has. Will you give me my cap?—I dropped it somewhere there."

Paul took up the desired article from the side of the vicar's chair and took it across to her. She put it gravely on her head and assumed a theatrical pose.

"Now I am Portia again," she told him—"only prettier, Justine says."

It was impossible to tell whether she were art-

less or fantastic, so elusive were her changes of manner and expression. Without warning, she made for the folding doors by which, an hour earlier, she had entered.

"Good-night, Mr. Gotch; good-night, Dearie," she said, groping for the handle. Paul moved to turn it, but before he could cross the floor she had passed out. He looked questioningly at the vicar.

Patrick Stuart opened his palms, Gallic fashion.

"I never attempt to fathom Elsie's proceedings," he confessed; "she has become more of an enigma to me than ever."

"What a pity!" replied Paul, musingly; "I should like to know how Elsie learned that particular Scotch song."



## CHAPTER IV

VOX ET PRAETEREA NIHIL .

To the east of the Gotch brickfield, and immediately behind the long garden and paddock of the vicarage, was a patch of cultivated ground, enclosed on three sides by a stout paling, on the fourth by the boundary wall of St. Faith's. In this reclaimed portion of the wilderness flourished an extraordinary medley of flowering plants, shrubs, and kitchen stuff. It boasted a small lawn, a "rockery," and a forcing frame or two, and was, in some sort, a detached supplement to the narrow border of grass and double daisies which surrounded the white cottage, half a mile away.

Here, under a yellow afternoon sun, a man was at work weeding. His long arms and large, coarse hands bore a strange disproportion to his short, squarely-set frame. A thick black beard hid his mouth and chin, but his black eyes were piercing and intelligent, and when he straightened himself to draw an occasional marked inspiration his teeth showed themselves to be singularly clear and even. At such moments, also,

his pose became as vigorous and alert as when, standing on an angle of the engine-house block, he had gazed after the retreating form of Christopher Gotch.

His task completed, he emptied the basket of uprooted growths on to the inevitable compost-heap, and going across to another bed stooped to tie up a row of carnations. Embarked upon the process, he began to sing to himself in the pleasant abstraction of the man who is laboring *con amore*. His voice was a rarely full and delicate tenor, with a bird-like sweetness in it. The song was one of those quivering lyric poems which the erotic genius of the Scots has heaped upon the altar of the grand passion—

"Her bower casement is latticed wi' flowers  
Tied up wi' siller thread,  
An' comely sits she in the midst  
Men's langing een to feed;  
She waves the ringlets frae her cheek  
Wi' her milky, milky han'  
An' her cheeks seem touched wi' the finger o' God,  
My bonnie Lady Ann.

"The morning clud is tasselt wi' gowd  
Like my luve's broidered cap,  
And on the mantle that my luve wears  
Is mony a gowden drap;  
Her bonnie ee-bree's a holy arch  
Cast by nae earthly han',  
And tne breath of heaven is atween the lips  
O' my bonnie Lady Ann."

The singing ceased, and the dwarf went on

silently with his occupation. Some one spoke to him suddenly.

"That is very pretty, fairy prince, is there no more?"

Allan Cary looked up. On the low sandstone slip which backed the carnation-clumps, Elsie Stuart was leaning. Her sensitive face was framed in a loose gray hood—the nebulous, appealing gray of the dove—and a gray cloak covered her shoulders. The coral lining of the hood threw a tremulous glow upon her cheeks and temples, and her chestnut hair added a peculiar, yet not discordant, note of color.

A soft light came into the dwarf's eyes; his powerful chest swelled and sank as he studied the picture. Yet he answered deliberately.

"There's nae mair o't to the purpose," he told her.

Elsie plucked at the clasp of the cloak.

"Who taught it to you?" she inquired.

"Naeboddy," replied the Scot; "I juist read it in an auld book."

The blind girl threw back her hood petulantly. The sightless orbs gleamed with pathetic anger.

"Oh, how I wish I were like other people, fairy prince!" cried the pouting lips; "I can only read a few silly books, and Justine says there are millions *she* could read if she had time."

Allan Cary sighed mournfully. Elsie put out her hands toward him.

"Why *won't* you come near me?" she cried;

"I wanted to touch your face, you sounded so sorry for me then."

The dwarf did not answer; he was poring upon the eager countenance of the blind girl.

"And you won't even tell me your name!" urged Elsie.

Allan Cary shook his head in an involuntary denial of the implied request.

"I canna, little leddy," he said, piteously; "oh, I canna. If I tauld ye, ye would find oot a' aboot me, and ye would na come to speak to me or to listen to ma songs ony mair."

"But I would," promised Elsie, "and surely your name wouldn't tell me that much."

"It would tell ye ower much for ye to bide my presence," replied the dwarf, miserably.

Elsie yielded the point.

"Well, come and let me touch your face," she begged; "then I shall know you."

"Na, na," protested the dwarf, stepping back, "it mauna be, little leddy, it mauna be."

"Oh, you are *mean*," retorted the appellant.

Allan Cary winced.

"Ye wouldna say that if ye kent a'," he persisted steadily.

"Tell me all, then," demanded Elsie, with a show of reason.

"Na, na," repeated the other, "I canna, I canna; it would be to say guid-bye t' ye for ever."

The blind girl pursed her lips and sulked.

"Do you know what I feel like, fairy prince?" she asked abruptly.



The dwarf's answer was a sad negative.

"I feel," said Elsie, with a startling abandon, "as if this wall were the end of the real world, and that I should like to climb on it and jump out—into fairyland."

"There is nae fairyland here," the Scot told her sorrowfully, "naething but a bit o' garden."

"Whose garden?" demanded Elsie.

"It belongs to Mistress Gotch, she wha owns the brickworks near by," explained Allan Cary, nervously.

"That will be Mr. Gotch's mother," said Elsie; "he knows my father. But why do you come to her garden so often, fairy prince?"

The Scot bit his lip.

"Because," he said, hoarsely, "because o' a little leddy 'at lives on the ither side o' a stane wa'."

The blind girl clapped her hands delightedly.

"Oh, I am glad!" she cried.

Allan Cary trembled.

"And now," added Elsie, returning to the attack, "you will tell me what you are like, won't you?"

"Maybe," said the dwarf, evasively; "but ye tell me first what ye *think* I am like."

Elsie reflected a moment, and then answered dreamily.

"You are taller than me, though not much, and oh, so graceful and brave, like a fairy prince. That's why I call you 'fairy prince'—and because you're so mysterious. Then, your face is very

proud, and set as though you feared nothing. But your mouth is kind, and your breath is like the scent of a tea-rose. And your hands——”

Allan Cary looked at his broad, thick palms and knotted fingers.

“Your hands are very soft and gentle, but very strong, so that you could pick me up and carry me all over the world, without ever getting tired. I would love some one to carry me always, my feet get so stiff and my side aches. But you—you walk over the grass so lightly and yet so proudly—oh, I know!—and because you are so beautiful you will not tell me who you are, so that you can go away when you are tired of me, and I shall never be able to find you again because I do not know what you are like or anything about you.”

Her voice broke as she reached the end of her involved concluding sentence.

“Na, na,” said the dwarf, huskily, “I’m nane o’ thae things—God knows Wha made me as I am!—but until ye send me awa’ I’ll no’ leave ye, He is my witness. But promise me ae thing.”

Elsie assented eagerly.

“If ony ane should see ye speakin’ tae me,” said Allan Cary, “an’ should begin to tell ye about me, ye will stap yer ears and rin awa’?”

She promised—reluctantly, yet pleased that he should proffer a request.

“But won’t you do something more than talk

to me?" she besought him; "see, touch my hand"—and she held out her dainty fingers.

The dwarf's face distorted with painful emotion.

"Dinna ask it," he said; her arm dropped despondently.

"Bide a wee," cried the Scot, moved with a thought. "I'll pit ye a waft o' heaven in yer nostrils that'll show ye I'm a leevin' soul and no' a bodiless voice."

He ran clumsily across the plot of garden to a point where a strip of hawthorn hedge had been enclosed by the wooden paling, and tore down a bough that was still in flower. Elsie remained passive, awaiting his return.

"Pit oot yer haund," he instructed, when he came back, having trimmed the hedge of the thorns.

She obeyed.

Allan Cary held the mass of odorous blossoms within her reach.

"Mind yersel' wi' the sma' prickles," he said.

Elsie took the branch in her arms, and cried out at the perfume.

"Is it a flower?" she asked.

"A hale world of flooers," answered the Scot; "ye maun pit it in water and it will live for days. They ca' it 'may.'"

The blind girl was hanging over the creamy bloom in passionate adoration.

"Did ye never smell it before?" said Allan Cary, surprised.

"Never," confessed Elsie; "I am horribly ignorant, fairy prince. You see, I have nearly always had an ache of some sort, and then, not being like other people——"

This was her one periphrasis for her lack of sight.

"I never could get on with my lessons. Once I went to a school, but it frightened me, and I never went again. Then I had a governess, but Justine and she quarreled dreadfully, and so I didn't learn much. Since I've been able to talk to you I've understood quite a lot of things for the first time."

The dwarf was contemplating her worshipingly; a fugitive anxiety interrupted his reverie.

"Have ye never spoken o' me to your freend, Mistress Justine?" he inquired.

Elsie's expression grew dazzling in its astuteness.

"Only about a fairy prince I knew," she replied, "and then, you see, I invent such a lot, they don't believe a word I say."

"Tell me another thing," pursued Allan Cary, wistfully; "what made ye believe I was sae bonnie?"

His picturesque neighbor drew a luxurious breath.

"The way you sing," she said; "fairy prince, if you are only half as beautiful as *your* voice,

you must be as beautiful as an angel. Do you suppose they sing songs like yours in heaven, fairy prince?"

"In the tradeetional heaven," remarked the Scot, dryly, "the angels are no' supposed to have sweethearts, and sin' sweetheirtin' is the reason for sic songs as mine, I shouldna look for ower mony o' them in the place ye name."

"H'm!" mused Elsie; "and what is the traditional heaven, fairy prince?"

Allan Cary reflected.

"That," he said, "where they coont on spendin' an eternal Sabbath in a transcendental kirk."

"Dear me," commented the puzzled auditor, "and what other sort of heaven is there?"

The dwarf lifted his eyes to the lucid zenith. "That," he answered, "in which the best God we can think o' will mak' our best thochts come true."

"Well," decided Elsie, dubiously, "anything's better than the first one."

A swelling clamor rose upon their ears—a clamor that grew and grew until the air rocked in eddies of tempestuous sound.

"That's the tea-gong," said the blind girl; "they always beat it like that for me—they never know where I am. Good-bye, fairy prince."

She sprang up, and passing around a screening privet hedge, hurried towards the house.

Undisturbed by the brazen din that had recalled Elsie to the vicarage, her father was pacing at the moment the floor of the sunny sitting-room



—pacing it with restless, varying strides, the muscular expression of impotent anger. In a deep chair by the fire sat a woman—a woman with a dark skin, thin lips, and glittering dark eyes. Her hands were yellow and shrunken, but supple and even aristocratic. They were busily plying a netting shuttle, the product of which lay on the lap of her silk gown in delicate confusion.

“Justine,” burst out the vicar, savagely, “I tell you I will not have it. Do you hear?”

“Without doubt,” answered the other; “you speak loud, and I can not shut my ears.”

Patrick Stuart reddened; the contempt of the retort was obtrusive.

“Understand distinctly,” he went on, striving for self-control, “the next time I catch you”—the contingency was somewhat vulgarly expressed, but the vicar’s anger had burst his tegumentary culture—“fostering the insane vanity which Elsie inherits——”

Justine sneered.

“Certainly,” she observed, with elaborate satire, “let us calumniate the dead; the dead can deny nothing.”

“If I calumniate the dead,” persisted the vicar hotly, “it is because the calumny is true.”

The statement was suspiciously like a contradiction in terms, but it passed unchallenged—Justine was in no mood to split hairs. She laughed provokingly.

"True?" she repeated; "*la pauvre* Gabrielle!—to be a woman and to marry a priest!"

Patrick Stuart dragged at the reins of his anger and answered quietly.

"That is sheer impertinence, Justine," he told her, "and you know it. My commands are explicit—you will disobey them at your peril."

Justine leaped up, the blood flaming in her sal-low cheeks.

"Bah!" she exclaimed, snapping her fingers at him—"that for your perils!—that for your commands; I despise them, I laugh at them, I disobey them—always, always, always! I will make *la petite* happy until I am dead—ah!" she interrupted herself sharply, though the vicar had not spoken; "you wish it may be soon, but I am well and strong, I shall live many years. *La petite* is mine—mine," she ran on, spitting the words out in short stinging clauses that made the English speech sound like her native tongue; "her mother gave her to me, and I will make her happy. Oh, yes, Mr. Stuart, I will tell her the charming stories that you detest; I will repeat her the little songs that weary you; I will teach her to make Juliet and Portia and Cléopâtre, and she shall be a woman, and not your daughter at all. *Mon Dieu!*" she apostrophized him fiercely, "am I an infant that you command and command and command?"

Patrick Stuart quailed before the flood of Jus-

tine's indignant oratory. She saw it, and pressed her advantage.

"*Ciel!*" she cried crisply, with a stamp of her foot; "did Gabrielle André——"

"Gabrielle Stuart," interrupted the vicar.

Justine made a wry face and evaded the correction.

"Did the poor Gabrielle," she said, "desire me to remain always with *la petite*, to keep her always gay, always like a little bird, a kitten, a butterfly, only that I should be disarm, retreat, dismiss, by a priest! Listen, Mr. Stuart," Justine parted the surname into two contumelious syllables, "have the goodness, if you please, to retire on the instant, or I dismiss myself. Perhaps you desire that I whisper to your parishioners how the mother of *la petite* was once upon the sta—age?"

Patrick Stuart cringed—it was not the first time that threat had fallen upon his will as the whip-lash falls upon the cur's back. Justine drew herself up scornfully, anticipating the effect of her ultimatum.

"I have my dismissal, then?" she demanded.

The vicar covered his face. When he looked up again his cheeks were ashen-gray.

"You are a madwoman, Justine Dupin," he began hoarsely, and stopped. A whimsical melody was nearing them along the corridor without. He could distinguish the words with increasing precision; they were bizarre in the extreme.

"Life's a hostel kept by Fate  
Where upon our way we wait—  
Sing, sing, let the merry cymbals ring:  
Life's a hostel where we drain  
Draughts of pleasure, draughts of pain."

The door opened and Elsie entered. In her arms she carried the bough of blossoming hawthorn that Allan Cary had given to her.

"Justine," she called, "look what I've got—a fairy prince gave it to me."

Patrick Stuart's mouth fixed sternly and he would have spoken. The Frenchwoman scowled him into silence.

"*Méchante!*" she declared; "what will the fairy princesses say?"

Elsie laughed coquettishly, and the vicar flashed a threat across the room.

"Smell, Justine, smell," she cried, and waved the branch so that the white bloom rained about her, showering Patrick Stuart with the pallid flowerets.

"It is like heaven," said Elsie, unconscious of his presence; "not the traditional heaven, Justine, but the other. Doesn't the scent make you feel as if something was going to happen?" She took up her song and carried it on fantastically.

"Fate, Fate, the hostess, gay coquette,  
Laughs, laughs, whene'er we frown or fret.  
If we groan and moan, alack, we must bundle, we must  
pack;  
The hostel's full, the night is late,  
'Tis in vain to frown at Fate."

The vicar turned and went out; the last line  
had smitten cruelly on his ears.

"'Tis in vain to frown at Fate."

Justine caught at the wild refrain and sang it  
with her excited charge.

"Sing, sing, sing; let the merry cymbals ring."



## CHAPTER V

### A LETTER AND A SERENADE

"Do you mind reading it over again?" asked the vicar, musingly.

Paul altered the position of the lamp, and turned to the beginning of the small folio.

"MY DEAR BOY,—"

he began :

"I admired your action the other day exceedingly, and I may say frankly that I admit—abstractly—its justice; but can I not plead for some mercy at your hands? I deserted your mother when I was not a great deal older than you are now, and I do not attempt to minimize the heinousness of that proceeding when I say that I was overcome by the hopeless *impasse* in which I found myself, as a result of marrying at a time when I could scarcely earn bread for one, let alone two."

There was a pause; the just completed sentence had been a long one. Patrick Stuart did not avail himself of the interruption to make any

comment—he felt that the inchoate glibness of the composition had struck as unpleasantly upon the ears of the younger man as it had upon his own. Paul resumed his task with impenetrable self-possession.

“I could make no headway in England, and I determined to go out alone to the States, hoping to find a foothold there, and, sooner or later, send for your mother. Upon landing in New York, I was plunged, by the mysterious loss of my wallet, into absolute and God-forsaken poverty, and being ashamed to write until I could send your mother some money, I put it off from day to day. Finally, I went West, and began to do well; but my courage failed me when I thought of writing, and I planned to come home and explain *viva voce*. Then I suffered a sudden reverse of fortune—lost eighty thousand dollars in twenty-four hours—and had to work like a slave to make it all over again, which I did, and to-day am worth a million and a half.”

Paul knew that Patrick Stuart was regarding him with a gentle keenness that verged upon cynicism, and guessed that the vicar was preparing to discount a surrender. An odd expression hovered upon the reader's lips as he went on with the letter.

“I am not going to tell you any lies about my feelings for your mother; you're too clever to believe me if I did, else I might, for I can't bear

to be out of friends with you. I came home because I heard of you from a man I met in New York City, Captain Peters, you remember him, of the 'Pocahontas.' I never had but one child in my life, and I'm mighty anxious that we should be chums. I can't write any more about it; I'm fifty-six, Paul, but the very thought of you brings the tears into my eyes like any woman's. Write and say you'll see me sometimes—I'll settle down in London and come up here once a month to see you. Your mother shall have nine-tenths of you—nineteen-twentieths if you like, only don't harden your heart against me. My God, but I should like you to have shaken hands with me. It's hardly good enough that a man shouldn't touch his own flesh and blood for ever, because he was *once* a bit of a coward. Write me a line, my boy; you may have youngsters of your own some day, and the devil may tempt you to sin against them. I loved your mother once (as she loved me, though she did keep a *per contra* account with all my faults in it—you'll believe the balance wasn't too big!) But you're my own, and I can't let you hate me. Write to me, Paul, for God's sake."

Paul Gotch lay down the pages of lank scrawl, and surveyed his auditor inquiringly.

"Well?" he observed.

The vicar pondered.

"It may be only clever," he decided at length;

"but it rings true—in parts. What is your answer?"

The son of Christopher Gotch took up a pen and drew a sheet of paper towards him. He wrote steadily, and Patrick Stuart waited. In a moment Paul Gotch handed him the brief manuscript. It ran—

*"On July the fifth, 1873, Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Harding sailed for New York in the 'City of Toronto.'"*

"What has that to do with anything?" demanded the vicar.

"I understand," replied Paul coolly, "that my father rejoiced in a 'middle name.' The 'middle name' was Harding."

He put a double line under the seventh and eighth words of the writing, so that the clause "and Mrs." stood out with redoubled significance.

"Dear me," said Patrick Stuart, comprehending, "how very lamentable." The adjective referred to the breach of morality on the part of the said Christopher Harding Gotch, not to his possession of an alternative cognomen.

"Have you a Bible handy?" inquired the younger Gotch, desisting from his occupation of crossing the *t*'s and dotting the *i*'s of his laconic communication.

The vicar reached to a luxurious calf-bound volume, the other opened it, turned to the Book

of the Prophet Malachi, verified a passage and copied it on to the slip. It was a grim, yet simple saying—

*The Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously.*

Paul Gotch folded the note, guiltless as it was of superscription or signature, and asked for an envelope. The vicar gave him one; he placed the ultimatum inside it, moistening the adhesive margins of the flap, and closing the slender receptacle with quiet deliberation. Then he addressed it thoughtfully—

*Christopher Harding Gotch, Esq.,  
The Adelphi Hotel,  
Liverpool.*

“I am afraid it is the only course to pursue,” said Patrick Stuart, “especially in view of the regrettable connection which is implied in the fact, your cognizance of which you reveal to him. How did you become aware of it?”

“It was my mother’s trump card,” returned Paul; “she feared something of this sort, I suppose”—he motioned to the letter of Christopher Gotch—“I found the ‘Toronto’s’ passenger list for that voyage on my blotting-pad this morning. The tell-tale entry was marked with a heavy cross—recently made. The ink is still pale. Heaven knows how she got hold of the thing; the ‘stars in their courses,’ I suppose.”



"You have considered the possibility of a coincidence?" ventured the vicar.

"You mean with regard to the name Harding?" elucidated Paul. "Is not the conjunction with that of Christopher almost tantamount to proof?"

"Circumstantial evidence," objected Patrick Stuart, though somewhat feebly withal.

"Three days before the 'Toronto' sailed," rejoined Paul Gotch, gravely. "my father left his home for the last time. In September of the same year, my mother tells me, she heard of their—that is, his—presence in San Francisco."

"He must have gone saloon, or at least second-class, for his name to get into the passenger-list," demurred the vicar. "How could that be?—he says he was bankrupt of funds."

"My father," explained Paul *dryly*, "is obviously more ingenious than honest."

"Dear me!" ejaculated Patrick Stuart; "I am very sorry for your mother, Paul."

"She is much to be pitied, yes," said the son of Selina Gotch, without enthusiasm. "I am a little sorry for my father; he is evidently capable of a rather ardent paternal affection. However, *fiat justitia*, you know." He went across the room, glancing at the clock on the mantel.

"Half-past ten," he remarked; "and I have this note to post. Good-night: I will let myself out as usual."

He unfastened one of the French casements, stepped through, and disappeared in the external gloom.

The vicarage of St. Faith's—a dingy, rough-hewn building of two irregular stories—lay westwards of the church. Upon its left, as it looked towards the highroad, was a modest poplar plantation, some few saplings in which thrust their clumsy heads athwart the glass of the vicar's library window. This plantation passed the side of the vicarage, bordered the churchyard, and stopped at the wall that bounded the flanking parapet.

As Paul Gotch passed along the path which frequent use had marked out upon the clayey soil of the plantation—the convenience of the route had made it, in the daytime, a favorite with the inhabitants of the vicarage—he heard the sound of singing, and thereat pausing to listen, recognized, to his entire amazement, the voice of Allan Cary. The words of the song were romantic, the subdued air lingering and tender.

“Her cheeks are like the apple-bud,  
Her brow is white as drifted snaw,  
Her lips are like the berries red  
That grow upon yon garden wa’.

“Ilk color that the heavens can gie  
Does but ae lovely rainbow fill;  
Sae a’ that’s sweet on earth is she,  
My bonnie lass ayont the hill.”

Paul Gotch peered cautiously ahead, and descried the shadowy figure of the singer perched upon the low roof of a shallow ground-floor story that abutted on the rear wall of the vicarage prop-

er. At a window immediately above was a glimmer of white raiment. The watcher stole a pace or two nearer and listened. The song was continued.

“Gin I’d been born a belted knight,  
Or laird o’ muckle gear and lan’,  
I wadna lay me down to sleep  
Afore I gat her lily han’.

“But waes my heart! I’m but a herd,  
An’ sae maun tether down my will,  
Yet come what may, I’ll climb the brae  
And see my lass ayont the hill.”

“Thank you, fairy prince,” murmured a voice, which could belong to no other than Elsie Stuart; “sing me another one.”

“Na, na, I maun gang noo,” answered the Scot, sorrowfully; “God knows I hae been mad to come here at a’ in sic a fashion.”

“But I asked you to, fairy prince,” protested Elsie; “you said you would do anything I asked you to. And when Justine read to me about Romeo and Juliet, I wanted some one to come and talk to me at my window. No one can hear us. Besides, what if they did?—you’re not a bit nice to-night, fairy prince.

“‘Oh, gentle Romeo,  
If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully.’”

That was what Juliet said. Romeo was a Montague, you know, and Juliet a Capulet—their fathers hated each other. You’re not going, fairy prince?”

"It's gettin' ower late, little leddy," whispered Allan Cary.

"I don't care," retorted Elsie, pettishly. "it's all night to me; I believe you're afraid. Romeo wasn't afraid—and Juliet's people wore swords," she supplemented with elfin malice.

"Gin I am afraid," said the Scot with bitterness, "'tis for yersel', I hae naething to be feared for, but the loss o' ye for ever. The lo'e o' ye has made a selfish fule o' me, or I wad hae had mair thocht for ye than ever to hae spoken t' ye, muckle less come here at sic an 'oor."

"Fairy prince, fairy prince," cried Elsie softly, "tell me that again; 'lo'e' means love, doesn't it?—you don't talk like other people, fairy prince, I expect you haven't learned English properly, like Justine. Tell me," she urged, "doesn't 'lo'e' mean love?"

Allan Cary did not answer. Elsie laughed richly.

"I know it does," she informed him, and added meditatively: "You never told me you loved me before."

"May God damn my soul to hell for telling it ye now," swore Allan under his breath.

"Oh-h, why?" asked Elsie.

The Scot started, horror-stricken.

"Ye didna hear?" he besought her—"God forgive me for blaspheming i' yer ears; na, na, I dinna lo'e ye, I dinna lo'e ye."

"That is not true, fairy prince," retorted Elsie,

bluntly. "When you talk to me your voice sounds as Justine made hers when she read what Romeo said to Juliet, and you say the same things, fairy prince, only far nicer. And I know you love me, because I love you."

Allan Cary sobbed tearlessly.

"Na, na," he pleaded, "dinna tell me that—dinna tell me that: I hae wranged ye eneuch withoot that. Say ye dinna mean it."

Elsie cooed; a bird-like murmur of delicious dissent.

"'Oh, gentle Romeo,'"

she quoted, humorously,

"'. . . If thou think'st I am too quickly won,  
I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay—  
So thou wilt woo, but else, not for the world.'"

"For God's sake, dinna talk like that," begged the Scot, "I maun say good-bye t'ye for ever—oh, that I had never spoken to ye at a', never seen yer bonnie face, never heard yer lintie's voice, never lookit on the winsome wee thing that God has pit ayont the reach of me—ayont the reach o' ony man."

"Fairy prince," cried Elsie, fearfully, leaning over the sill and calling sibilantly into the night; "what do you mean, fairy prince? Shall I never have any one to love me? will no one ever kiss me? can I never have somebody of my own—my very own—as Juliet and Portia and Cleopatra had?"



Her chestnut hair fell out over her shoulders, and the scent of it came to Allan Cary's nostrils.

"Oh, please don't say that, fairy prince," she wailed; "I do want somebody. I was born to be pitied and made much of. My heart aches always because I am lonely. Don't say it must go on aching. Will no one ever love me, because I am blind? Oh, fairy prince, say *you* love me."

Allan Cary lifted up his face.

"The Lord hae mercy on baith o' us," he said, brokenly, "for I maun aye lo'e ye."

Elsie drew in her breath—a sob of shuddering, uncontrollable happiness.

"Kiss me, fairy prince," she cried, "kiss me!"

And Allan Cary straightened himself from his precarious foothold and kissed her upon the lips. . . .

Paul Gotch withdrew into the shadow of the poplars. An uncertain wind stirred them with the sound of a sigh. He looked up at the delicate dusk of the June night.

"Great God," he murmured, "Thou that doest all things well—what a tragi-comedy is this!"

He stood awhile among the clustered saplings, then heard the sound of the dwarf's descent and followed him quickly.

Progressing by short, uncouth strides, Allan Cary cleared the plantation, traversed the open churchyard, climbed its low wall of sandstone rubble, crossed the cinder-path that led to the white cottage, and descended a muddy slope into

the bottom of the clayfield. A master of its mutable geography, he threaded the maze of its pools and hillocks at a rapid rate; Paul Gotch had much ado to keep him under observation.

Soon the dwarf came upon the inclined viaduct that ran up to the second floor of the shadowy engine-house; he breasted it sturdily, Paul close at his heels. The sound of the stoker's shovel floated to the ears of both from the well of the drying-shed, and each trod with a sudden extravagant caution. Half-way up the rough declivity the Scot stepped off, gained the door of a small office, unlocked it, and entered. His pursuer took up a strategic position, and waited. A moment later Allan Cary reappeared, carrying something under his arm. The watcher's heart leaped as he divined, from a random outline, its ominous nature. The dwarf paused to secure a rasping padlock; that done, he addressed himself toward the giant kilns, whose ghostly vapors rolled fitfully over the clay, going northward with the wind. Paul Gotch resumed his cautious pursuit of his henchman.

Beside the tallest of the smoldering piles Allan Cary halted, and choosing a spot in its sloping face where the imprisoned fire had eaten its way between the superincumbent strata of bricks, he bent to the lurid glow. Paul crept up behind him and shuddered to perceive his occupation. He was loading a shotgun. The capricious halo that waxed and waned about him gleamed inter-

mittently on the brown barrels, and warmed the brass setting of the cartridge into bronze.

The snap of the closing breech smote awakingly upon Paul's ear, and he started forward to seize the weapon, but Allan Cary laid it down uncocked, and burst out fiercely.

"I winna do't! I winna do't!" he cried. "She said, 'Say ye lo'e me, fairy prince,' an' I said, 'I maun aye lo'e ye, lassie.' An' gin I gae to see her nae mair; gin I sing to her nae mair; gin I come nae mair to len' her ma een that she may see ilka flooer and tree, ilka bird and beast, as nane but me can show them to her—gin I put death and hell atween us, will she no' ca' to me i' her leddy voice, 'Fairy prince! fairy prince!' I canna do't—her voice wad come to me under the mools, and I couldna rest i' ma grave. I canna live withoot her, and God hae mercy upo' me, I canna dee withoot her, either."

The distressful monologue lost itself in a spasm of tears. Paul Gotch moved slowly into the equivocal radiance that shone about the vague extremity of the kiln. Allan Cary looked up, startled; his eyes met the eyes of the disturber.

"Ye're oot late, laddie," he said, trying to speak unconcernedly.

Paul touched the shotgun significantly with his foot. "Allan, Allan," he returned, sorrowfully; "what can I say to you, my poor friend?"

The Scot lifted his face to the sky, flooded with the pallor of the risen moon. His mouth quiv-

ered and grew hard ; then he answered somberly—

“Sae naething to me at a’, lest I curse ye as Job cursed them that comforted him wi’ words.”

Allan Cary turned and strode off hastily, making for the eastern boundary of the estate—where the tower of St. Faith’s rose dimly against the indigo horizon. Paul took up the discarded weapon and set out across the clayfield in the direction of the Gotch dwelling. As the gloom closed about him, a tall figure stalked from the shadows that slept to windward of the burning mass, and peered along the ragged ledge between it and the brink of the precipitous “cutting.” Beneath lay a chance pool, swollen by the recent rains—the transverse lines of light, thrown from the side of the kiln, made a shining grille upon the surface of the black water. The new-comer had no eyes for the pool or the path, he was gazing eagerly into the darkness ahead.

“It is the boy, sure enough,” he muttered ; “I thought I hadn’t missed him. Which way did he go? Damn the place, it’s as dark as a wolf’s mouth.”

He plunged into the night, cursing as he went, and vanished suddenly.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE PLAY OF TRAGEDY

"WHERE shall we lay him down?" asked the dwarf softly.

Paul hesitated on the threshold of the little lobby, but answered with decision.

"Here," he said, and opened the door of the room where he had held that strange inquiry into his father's marital misconduct.

Allan Cary whispered to the group behind them—three tall laborers in the knee-girt corduroys and cotton shirts of their class. Something grim and stark swung between them, upborne on a stout plank. Two pairs of brown palms gripped one rough extremity, guarding an iron-gray head. A few drops of soiled water splashed upon the oilcloth of the passage.

The three carried their burden into the bright chamber. Paul drew out the couch and helped to lift the rigid figure upon it. For a moment the dead man's shoulders rested heavily in his son's arms; a pale shaft from the window glittered on a gold pin in the drenched scarf.

Their embarrassed co-operation ended, the



brickmakers shuffled reverently out of the apartment; Allan Cary remained. Paul turned to him, catching at a question.

"Do you know who this was, Allan?" he said harshly; "this harmless clay that lies so still in the sunshine."

"Yin o' yer ane fowk, is't no'?" replied the Scot, wondering; "he's a rare look o' yersel', puir body. Yer mither'll be sair put about; nae doot he lost his way i' the dark, and the pits are just brimmin' after the rains."

Paul Gotch regarded the speaker curiously. "It was my father, Allan," he said; "my father! He came back to us two days ago, and we sent him away, after fair trial and verdict. And now, Allan, Tragedy has played her ace, and where are our court cards of virtue and justice?"

The dwarf bent his head. "May God hae mercy upon him," he murmured.

"Why not?" said Paul, the thought springing to his lips; "we had none."

Allan Cary sighed, and followed his subordinates without offering to continue the argument.

"My God!" quoted Memory in the ear of Paul Gotch, "but I should like you to have shaken hands with me."

He stood looking at the stalwart form so masterful in its experienced middle-age. A canary, hung in a cage close by, stirred cheerfully and broke into a flood of melodious assertion. The watcher roused, and lowered the blinds. The

little creature lapsed into silence with a regretful chirp, and Paul left the shadowy chamber, abandoning it to the discomfited musician and the heedless dead.

When he returned, it was to cover the immobile face with a soft white square. The determined profile still showed vaguely, acquiring a novel dignity in repose.

"My God!" sounded again in the recesses of Paul's mind, "but I should like you to have shaken hands with me." The repetition was more thrilling in the funereal gloom than it had been in the gathering sunshine; the son of Selina Gotch yielded to an uncontrollable impulse, and stooping, he took the icy fingers in his own.

Then he went to his mother's room.

Pausing upon an upper landing, he tapped lightly at a thin panel. Receiving no answer, he tapped again.

"Come in," said a tremulous voice, heavy with sleep. Paul entered quietly, and stepped to the bedside. Selina Gotch raised her eyes to her son's and smiled wanly.

"You're up early," she told him; "have you had your breakfast?"

"Not yet," said her son, evasively; but the tender vigilance of the inquiry moved him. He bent and kissed her. Selina Gotch's emotions were very quick and strong; the gray eyes filled with tears, and the frail lips responded quiveringly to the caress. The touch of the dead man's

fingers seemed to fade away before the access of feeling that pulsed warmly in her son's veins.

"Something has happened," he began, with caution; "an accident in the clayfield—some one, unfortunately, has been drowned."

His mother's expression contracted to one of pity.

"Not another child?" she said, nervously.

"No," answered Paul; "a man; some one we know; slightly, that is. You knew him better at one time."

He stroked her hand—a spare, smooth hand, at once fine, and powerful.

"Can't you guess?" he asked; "it is my—my father."

Mrs. Gotch gazed at him incredulously.

"He must have been in the neighborhood," pursued Paul, as indifferently as was possible, "and not being familiar with the pits, stumbled into one. Cary found him this morning, quite dead."

The tears had ebbed from Mrs. Gotch's eyes, her mouth hardened. Her son comprehended.

"He may have been trying to see me," said Paul; "but if so, he did not succeed. On the contrary, I wrote him a brief note yesterday—in answer to one I received from him——"

Selina Gotch took a deep breath of painful anger.

"Letting him understand that I had become aware of certain new facts, and that it was even

more than ever impossible for us to become—acquainted. That letter,” went on Paul, musingly. “he can not have received, and now he will never receive it.”

Mrs. Gotch glanced jealously at her son. She herself had no words to express the subtle anxiety which troubled her.

“I am sorry he should have met with such a death,” said Paul, fathoming his mother’s thought; “I believe that is all. Why should you doubt me? You chose him to be my father; you loved him once, and I am because of it. He sinned against you, and I denied him part or lot in me. What more would you have? One can not hate by merely willing it.”

The racked maternal bosom swelled in a spasm of bitter resentment, and Selina Gotch wept.

“I wish,” she sobbed, “we had never heard of him again.”

“It might have been for the best,” said Paul; “I think his coming back has——” He checked himself abruptly.

“Has what?” persisted Mrs. Gotch.

“Has taught me that I have a heart,” concluded her son; “at least I never knew it to ache before. And now it aches strangely—for you and for him; yes, and for myself, too.”

An impulse of candor seized upon him, overwhelming the stiff reserve which he inherited from his mother.

“You have made me very happy always,” he

told her impetuously; "I feel as if I had just awakened from a long and sheltered dream; as if my fort of philosophy had been carried by assault, and Life and Death, with all their ban-dogs of perplexity, were howling round the citadel. Poor pale Amazon, you kept the gates gallantly, but it was no use, you see."

He shrank into silence, startled by the unusual frankness of his outburst. Selina Gotch stirred.

"I had better get up," she said; "there will be a great deal to do."

Paul rose.

"I will attend to all that I can myself," he answered, and met her glance doubtfully. "We shall not quite be able to hide our skeleton from the Public and the Law," he added; "but we shall try, shall we not?"

Selina Gotch motioned affirmatively; the concession was to her son, not to the dead.

"You—you would rather not see him," faltered Paul.

Mrs. Gotch knitted her brows. "Why should I?" she inquired.

Her son found no reply sufficiently satisfactory to an impromptu judgment and so departed.

In the hall he reached for his hat, went out into the vast clayfield and strolled towards St. Faith's. As he skirted a stretch of hitherto untouched grass-land, whose miscellaneous slopes and flattened hillocks—strewn with the orange stars of the dandelion, native to the raw earths



of the locality—ran down to the largest and shallowest of the clay-pits, he saw that Elsie Stuart, chaperoned by the precise figure of Justine Dupin, sat upon a strip of velvety turf that looked across the brown pool. He gained the spot and spoke to them.

"What brings you here?" he asked the blind girl; "are there no parks?"

"Much good parks are!" snapped Elsie; "the trees worry me with their fuss and chatter. Here I can feel nothing but sun and emptiness, and my thoughts can go on forever without bumping against anything."

Suddenly interested, Paul seated himself on a bank beside her.

"May I learn what you were thinking about?" he said.

"You may," replied Elsie. "I was lying on Aladdin's carpet, curled up on a bed of flowers, and floating to the other heaven, the heaven where the angels all have sweethearts."

"Why the other heaven?" demanded Paul.

"Well, you know," explained the blind girl, "there are two heavens—the traditional one and the other one. In the traditional one it is always Sunday, and they only sing hymns; in the other they never have any Sundays, and they sing songs that make your heart fly round in your chest like a bird in a cage. Which heaven are you going to, Mr. Gotch?"

"I haven't decided," said Paul, beguiled, de-

spite his melancholy; "in any case I have no sweetheart, Elsie. Do they provide them in the other heaven?"

"I should say so," responded Elsie, "but the best sort are the ones you find here and take with you."

Paul studied sorrowfully the glowing face of the speaker, he knew what had lent that warmth to the soft cheek, that light to the wide violet orbs, that velvet laughter to the childish tones. He broke off the conversation.

"Is your father at home, Elsie?" he asked.

"Poor Dearie has had to go to a diocesan conference," said the blind girl, mischievously. "I went once, and they put me up in a gallery sort of place, while all the clergy talked down below. Such a lot of funny little voices, like bees on the sandhills in the sun."

Paul turned back. "Good-bye, Elsie," he called, "good-morning, Miss Dupin; I will see Mr. Stuart again."

He reached the white cottage after a detour to the mill, where he failed to find Allen Cary. Re-entering the narrow passage he noticed that the door of his work-room was open, and glanced in. Selina Gotch sat by the body of her husband, her arms thrown upon the table, her head hidden between them, her shoulders heaving.

Paul crept away, and stole into the sunlit meadow, possessed by an infinite astonishment.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE LAST JOURNEY

THERE is a sound, not born of any living thing, a sound, obscure yet awfully distinct, that seems like the last querulous protest of the dead against oblivion. It is the whine of the long screws in the closing coffin.

This sound fell upon the ears of Paul Gotch: he rose and buttoned his frock-coat. Mrs. Gotch went out of the dining-room, to return with a loose dark ulster.

"Put this on," she said, solicitously.

Her son hesitated. "It—it isn't black," he answered.

Mrs. Gotch proffered the garment, mutely insistent; Paul surrendered. His mother settled the collar—her fingers trembling. Paul drew the gray head to him and kissed it; Mrs. Gotch looked up timidly.

"Don't take off your hat," she murmured; "it has been raining, and the wind is quite cold this morning."

Cautious fingers rapped interruptingly upon a panel of the door, and a face appeared, plump,

vinous, ludicrously mournful. The bilious eyes beckoned privily to Paul; he complied with the gesture.

"Shall we," desired his ghoulisn cicerone—"shall we lift the body now, sir?"

The young man assented vaguely and went back to his mother. Some subtle *rapport* of antagonism troubled both, yet shunned the definition of speech. A confused soft babel of footsteps penetrated from the lobby without, men moving with difficult breathing under a grim burden. The glances of the listeners met; Paul sighed and left his mother alone. Mrs. Gotch stole to one of the small panes and peered through.

The brickfield was veiled in a thin mist, tattered capriciously by a raw north wind. Occasionally the fleecy screen faded into uncertain showers. The bearers of the coffin moved down the narrow walk, threaded the gate and advanced swayingly over the cinder-path toward the eastern roadway. Paul followed them, a tall, despondent figure.

Some titanic emotion clutched at the heart of Selina Gotch; she could not weep, nor could her agonized bosom dilate upon its delirious protest of jealousy; she felt the currents of being pause in her convulsed frame, her brain numbed; for a second the darkness of the Unendurable blotted her out. Then she crept back to conscious

existence, a frail, stricken creature with the cup of bitterness empty in her hand.

Patiently the somber carriers marched with their load. Not a flower lay upon the yellow casket, no pall covered it from the condensing clouds that rolled about it. Shoulder-high and feet foremost Christopher Gotch traveled to his grave, as virile and dispassionate as in life. And after him came his unwilling captive; the spoil of a victory plucked out of the very jaws of defeat.

At the border of the clayfield were a hearse and a single carriage. A little crowd marked, with its opposing groups of spectators, the way to the two pompous equipages. The coffin slid shriekingly between the planes of frosted glass and shining enamel; Paul mounted into the lumbering ark behind, there was a clatter of hoofs, and the wheels, clearing the curb, settled into those slow revolutions which, all too quickly, devour the last journey.

The Law had set its seal upon the remains of Christopher Gotch, apologetic officials had come and gone in its formal service, twelve reluctant strangers had seen a bloodless face and rigid limbs and rendered judgment thereon; Christopher Gotch might claim—unlike Ophelia—his “bringing home of bell and burial.” His pulses had been stilled by chance, not choice; be his record what it might, the church would not turn her countenance from him.



Out of the finite Unknown came Christopher Gotch to ask for love and pardon; into the infinite Unknown he had departed, haply on the same quest. Paul plumbed the shallows of his own faith as he sat in a corner of the gloomy carriage. Once he smiled wanly; the Future focusing itself automatically into the Paradise of convention, an irreverent realism had suggested his mother's uncompromising attitude even towards a redeemed Christopher. He shuddered to fathom the inherent ferocity of the feud.

The hearse swerved into sight beyond the window at his elbow as it rounded a corner. Ahead lay the broad central avenue of a handsome modern city of the dead; its well-grown trees and thick plantations cowering wetly in the dank atmosphere. The vehicles stopped at one of the neat ceremonial churches scattered over it. A mute opened the carriage-door and the solitary mourner descended. The shouldered coffin passed into the weather-beaten porch and came to rest upon the trestles at the entrance of the aisle. Paul noticed that the rain-drops were standing on the polished elm in beads like tears.

He gained one of the comfortless pews and took a seat. The church was empty, and, in spite of the June day, bitterly chill and damp. Paul surveyed the bare structure, its severely plain chancel, its greenish diamonds of leaded glass, its grained reading-desk, its harsh concrete pavement and altar-steps. He turned and looked at

the gaunt, flowerless casket upon the trestles, then at the frowning walls about him. A cynical thought put itself into a slashing epigram with a verse-like swing in it—"Thou hast brought thy dead to a God as dead." The sentence pleased him, it was so brutally apt; he pondered possible rhymes.

A slight bustle at the west end of the church roused him from his absorption. Another coffin was being set down side by side with that of Christopher Gotch. Paul's irritable humor kindled into resentment; he wished he had arranged for a private service and asked Patrick Stuart to officiate. There would have been a wealth of artistic comfort in his beautiful manners and gentle, bearded mouth. Who were the new-comers?—doubtless some homespun folk with noisy tears and unkempt lamentation.

While he fumed, cold and petulant, the mourners came up the aisle, a knot of women, chiefly of that gross, gadding sort which joys and sorrows with its neighbor—not seldom maugre its neighbor's permission. Amid this escort there moved a young girl, slender, erect, pathetically hung with crape, frozen by tragedy into a bewildered calm. Her flimsy sables were crisp and new; those of the attendant matrons limp and rusty, the charitable resurrections of more personal woe.

Paul's anger ebbed from him; the sullen church had gained an instant sanctity from that white

maiden visage with the drooped lids. He gazed at it curiously—it had an air of piteous steadfastness; a repressed sob hung at a delicate angle of the mouth. The women settled themselves on either hand with reciprocally sympathetic signals.

The chaplain hurried into position at the reading-desk, a short, prosaic figure in a flapping surplice. His voice was weak and reedy, and its echoes danced fantastically among the brown rafters—piping the supernal hypotheses of that majestic consecration which has challenged for so many centuries an unanswering mystery.

Paul Gotch's sceptical mind wavered under the lyrical, melancholy English of the psalms, and warmed to the silver trumpet of the apostolic harangue. The girl, among her uncouth escort, was weeping silently, little flushes of carmine throbbed in her cheeks and tinged her ears and eyelids. Paul watched her, wondering who of all her kin lay there beside his father on the trestles—two lifelong strangers, cheek by jowl in death.

The lesson over, the chaplain came down the church; the women abandoned their pew and rustled in his wake. Paul stayed where he was, deeming *la place aux dames* an applicable canon. To his surprise the coffin that was raised to the shoulders of its bearers was that of his father. He went hastily along the aisle. The weighted mutes strode out into the porch, and the two chief mourners found themselves unexpectedly

face to face. For a moment they stood so, fascinated by an impulse of curiosity, then Paul bowed deeply and passed on. His eye fell upon the remaining coffin. It bore a cross of lilies and narcissus; nevertheless, he could read the name on the half-hidden plate—"Frances Latimer"; the succeeding dates were forty years apart.

"Her mother," he said to himself as he went on into the open. A doubtful rain was descending; the chaplain had donned a silk hat, his scanty surplice shook in the intermittent breezes about his clumsy boots and trouser-legs.

The final resting-place of Christopher Gotch was near a portion of the great cemetery still park-like and rural. Wide stretches of rough natural green-sward, shadowed by ancient oaks, skirted here the dense assemblage of gleaming monuments.

Paul watched perplexedly as the service ended. He could not touch the moist earth when they came to the hideous "ashes to ashes"; the chaplain dropped a convenient clod, then glanced at him pityingly. The hollow rattle wakened Paul's comatose fancy, and set it on the brink of illimitable horrors. By the time he had it mastered again, the chaplain had concluded the collect, repeated the benediction, and was off to his second service.

The dead man's son lost himself in a troubled reverie. Too honest for equivocation, too cynical for credulity, too imaginative for negation, he

was contemplating, for the first time with a definite stake in the phenomenon, the cessation of physical existence. The catastrophe of which he was himself the expression and the memento—the catastrophe of an embittered life—seemed hysterical and overwrought beside the crushing terror of this other; the catastrophe of death. He asked himself questions which outran his vocabulary and left him gasping in a sea of pure thought.

The raucous tones of the chaplain's voice revived his interest in the material world. A stride or so away were the feminine mourners. The laborers beside him ceased to ply their spades. The matrons wept heartily out of mere barbarous fellowship; their charge had no tears now. A dizzying tension of will was evidently all that stood between her and an insanity of sorrow; her eyes were closed, her lips compressed, her nostrils dilated. Once or twice, as the women whispered to her, she took her breath in a sick sob, or moved her head, as a child that refuses comfort. It was the Sentient in the grasp of the Inflexible.

The guard of matrons closed vigilantly about her, but there was no need of the precaution; the final words of the service spoken, she turned and went away with her attendants, walking unsteadily, like one in a dream. The sextons began to fill in somewhat of the newly-tenanted graves.

Paul sought out and dismissed the waiting carriage, to return home on foot. A meal was ready



for him in the parlor of the cottage on the clay-field—a pleasant, cheerful meal with a bright fire accompanying it to conjure the vapors of the squalid afternoon. He shut the door behind him as he entered, and shivered strongly, finding Death's shadowy Beyond the more awful in presence of Life's fond, familiar Here.

His mother's little maid waited on him nervously; it was her privilege but seldom.

"Mrs. Gotch had a bad headache, sir," she told him, bringing his plate with a certain coquettish grace—she had put on a clean print gown, also there was a red ribbon at her throat—"and went to lie down for a while. But when I peeped in to know when you would be back, sir, she had dropped off and was sleeping beautifully. So I brought up your dinner myself."

"That was very considerate of you, Margaret," answered her master, glancing at her with reticent kindness. Margaret blushed at the glance; poor soul, she had no need; her tiny image in those dusky pupils sparkled on the surface only. They were contrasting cruelly her simple features and transient bloom of youth with the inseparable beauty and Olympian grief of that white face on which they had lingered so wistfully for an hour.

"Mr. Cary has been asking for you, sir," intimated Margaret, with unnecessary devotion, when next she came through; "he said he would

call up again. Will you have your coffee now, sir?"

"Thank you," murmured Paul out of his own thoughts, and Margaret retreated, indefinitely regretful at the approaching termination of her ministry.

Paul sipped his coffee luxuriously; Margaret had dowered it richly with cream. She herself stayed to draw the coals together in the high grate, peeping reverently meanwhile at the young man's lounging figure. At length she stole quietly from the room. Beneath that pink holland bodice a brave if uncultured spirit was fluttering a soft breast with futile tenderness.

"Mr. Cary, sir," she returned to say. Paul relinquished his cup and got up from the table.

"Don't let me disturb ye," protested the dwarf.

"Not at all," responded the other; "have some coffee."

"I thank ye, no," said Allan Cary. He sat down near the threshold and fumbled with his hat.

"Ye'll hae had a sair day the day," he went on, his black orbs gleaming with an eloquence the monosyllables belied.

"Yes," assented Paul, dreamily; "I have been to the jumping-off place, Allan, and my eyes have seen no farther into its darkness than others have done before me."

"It's a fearsome riddle," said the Scot. He

hesitated a moment, then continued suddenly: "Ye'll no' guess why I'm here?"

"No," admitted Paul.

"I'm on a selfish errand," said the dwarf, fiercely; "but it maun oot. I've come to ask ye to set me free—I canna stay wi' ye any langer."

"My dear Allan!" began Paul Gotch, "you can't mean that."

"Aye, but I dae," said the Scot, with self-contempt; "it'll tak ye aff yer buiks and spoil a' yer graund works—it'll fash ye and yer mithers tae deith, but I dinna care. I'm aff—aff tae see life, aff tae tak my fill o' the warld, tae find a short road tae the Deil somehow."

Paul Gotch stared at the speaker, amazed—then in a flash comprehended and bent his head before the dwarf's wild, inverted woe.

"Ye've been gude frien's tae me," pursued Allan Cary; "ye and yer mithers. I've had a bonnie time wi' ye and yer buiks, Paul; my mind's a span taller. An' I hae been true man tae ye an' dune weel by the mill. But I maun gang, I maun gang—ye'll gie me leave?"

"Yes," promised Paul sadly; "is there no other way?"

"Nane," said the dwarf; "ma life's a revellt skein, but I hae had ma 'oor. Dinna ye greet for me, Paul; ane withoot eyes has lookit intae ma saul and found me worthy o' her. Ye kent a' the ither nicht, didna ye?—and ye didna despise me; so I'll no' lie tae ye. But I maun gang,

I'm a man like yersel', and her face grups me about the heirt. I mauna be where she is—she lo'es me too, ye ken."

A dry sob burst from his lips; Paul wrung his hand dumbly.

"I will arrange everything," added the younger man, after a hiatus of troublous feeling; "how soon do you want to go?"

"I'll bide till ye're in the way o' doin' without me," said Allan Cary hoarsely; "ye're ower gude, ower gude. But if ever ye lo'e a lassie o' yer ain, ye'll ken a' that's i' ma heirt this nicht. Dinna trouble tae let me oot."

He drew the door open with a jerk and disappeared hurriedly.

Paul passed the next hour brooding over the dwindling fire. Mrs. Gotch roused him.

"You are very thoughtful," she said, with latent jealousy.

"I was thinking," answered her son, "of a girl I saw to-day—she was burying some one very dear to her, her mother, I imagine; poor child, she seemed overwhelmed with grief." He put an arm about the worn figure beside him. "Her mother!" he repeated; "after all, our mothers are more to us than any one else can ever be."

For an instant Selina Gotch's heart was at peace. "Not to a man," she objected belatedly, though without intentional point in the remark; "you know the old rhyme—

“‘My son’s my son till he gets him a wife,  
But my daughter’s my daughter all her life.’”

“Would you mind?” asked Paul, obliquely.

“Let us wait and see,” suggested Mrs. Gotch,  
with unconscious prudence.



## CHAPTER VIII

### A CONTROVERSY AND A COMPACT

"MR. GOTCH!" said the voice of Elsie Stuart, descending to Paul's ear as he stepped into the ample hall-way of the vicarage, "will you please come up-stairs?"

Paul obeyed, in part: he went to the middle of the long flight. There he halted doubtfully.

"Come right up," demanded Elsie. "I knew it was you by your step. Justine is out—I—I want you to see Tommie; I have just got him."

Having no courteous alternative, Paul followed Elsie into her own domains. "Tommie" proved to be a splendid Angora cat, coiled sleepily in a flannel-lined basket, a silver bell dangling at his aristocratic neck.

"Isn't he soft and lazy?" inquired Elsie. "But he's got a wicked face—you've only to feel it—so."

She drew her small fingers over the feline head.

"There," she said, "that makes me think of awful things; things with queer shivery smiles—waiting for you round corners. Ugh!"

The blind girl felt for the tiny jaws and pulled

them asunder. "Here are some nice teeth for you," she went on, "and here"—she spread a dainty paw to demonstrate the curved talons—"here are some pretty claws. Oh, you little beast"—she apostrophized the drowsy animal—"how I hate you!"

Elsie faced about suddenly. "Mr. Gotch," she said, "what do you think of people who break promises?"

"Men or women?" queried Paul, with gentle cynicism.

"Why?" demanded the blind girl.

"Well," returned Paul, quizzically, "there's really not much difference in theory, but the practical wisdom of several centuries has decided that a man must keep his word, a woman—may."

"Thank you," said Elsie, "that's a poor joke. Never mind, I suppose it's true. Now, I'm going to ask you a question, Mr. Gotch—a very important question. Will you swear to answer me truthfully?"

"I swear," responded Paul, sitting down, the better to consider the situation.

"Then," said Elsie, "what do you know about gardening?"

"Absolutely nothing," confessed the witness.

"Do you know anybody who does?" proceeded the examining counsel.

Paul bit his lip. "No-no," he said, warily; he recollected that Allan Cary was a master of the art in question. Elsie, seated on the table

edge, was pointing her toes with a notable assumption of indifference.

"May a man tell fibs?" she asked, with the utmost sweetness.

"A man may," said Paul, trying to turn the conversation; "a woman—must. You simply reverse my previous rule."

"Pshaw!" said the blind girl, recklessly, "hasn't your mother a garden?"

"Scarcely enough to mention," retorted Paul.

"Who looks after it?" persisted Elsie.

"When I can find time, myself," said Paul, mendaciously, forgetting his recent disclaimer of horticultural knowledge.

"Thank you," sniffed Elsie, slipping from her throne; "that will do; you were going to see my father, pray don't let me detain you," and she caught up the Angora in her arms—"do you know, I feel that Tommie has taken quite a dislike to you; run away quickly, he is very dangerous at times—to—to *strangers!*"

With which fling Elsie disappeared through a door at the farther side of the sunny sitting-room, leaving her invited guest to his own devices. He took his departure, thrilled by a great pity, and regaining the hall, entered the library.

"I come unannounced," he said, apologetically, "your French windows permitted me to see that you were alone. But I needed the services of a mat—our moorland residence is still over our

ankles—so went round to the front and was captured by Elsie.”

“Tommie, I suppose,” remarked Patrick Stuart; “he is Elsie’s newest treasure.”

“Treasure!” ejaculated Paul, wheeling out his favorite arm-chair; “she assured him in my presence that she hated him.”

“Elsie is a woman,” said the vicar; “with women petting generally takes the form of bullying.”

“Sagacious man!” bantered Paul; “I envy you your stock of aphorisms. Repeat me some on—on Death, for instance.”

The vicar grew serious.

“Death is too grim a subject for the aphorist,” he protested.

“My apostolic namesake did not find it so,” replied the younger man; “defend me, oh son of the Church, her service for the dead.”

“Which part of it,” parried the vicar.

“All of it,” answered Paul, “but especially that ‘sure and certain hope’ which is neither sure nor certain. Said over a saint it is a tragedy—for the living; said over a sinner it is a comedy—for the dead.”

Patrick Stuart made a motion of dislike. His visitor was ruthless. “The Calvinism of it hits like a bludgeon,” he said; “‘shortly to accomplish the number of Thine elect’—whittle that down, you amiable Jesuit.”

“There is no need,” demurred the vicar, skil-

fully; "I am no Low Churchman, to claim plenary inspiration for the Prayer-book."

"Nay," said Paul; "if you are going to jettison your spiritual cargo at that rate I am done. But tell me—'in the beaten way of friendship,' as Hamlet has it—where do you suppose my luckless devil of a father is now?"

Patrick Stuart took a quiet inspiration. "You hit between the eyes, Paul," he commented.

"And then get ready to parry one of your cross-counters," was the retort; "well, fire away."

"Can you reply to your own question?" demanded the vicar.

"No," said Paul, frankly.

"Yet you quarrel with my answer," objected the casuist.

"I haven't heard it yet," fenced Paul; "what is it?"

"He is in God's hands," said Patrick Stuart.

"An anthropomorphic simile," thrust his opponent.

"In God's keeping, then."

"You base one hypothesis on another," came the swift riposte; "the old story of the elephant and the tortoise."

"Do you challenge my primary one?"

"The existence of God?—no."

"Do you accept it?"

"As a working hypothesis, yes. Is it likely ever to be anything else on this side of the grave?"



"If it ever were anything else—on this side of the grave—would not the Christian *faith* become a contradiction in terms?"

Paul threw himself back in his chair. "You are one too many for me!" he owned; "but you still leave my father an uncharted comet."

"In a universe of law and order," returned the vicar, with a smile of the practiced debater who has once more demonstrated his skill.

His adversary abandoned the duel.

"A new aspect of the paternal problem has presented itself," he observed inconsequently; "it appears from American advices that there are, as my father hinted, dollars, also a will—a will chiefly charitable but with a sweeping codicil in my favor. My father was a careful man; the codicil bears date immediately before his sailing for England."

"I congratulate you," said Patrick Stuart.

"So can not I myself," rejoined Paul; "being the victim of a syllogism—as thus. Wealth gotten by deserting a wife is unholy. This money was got by deserting a wife. Ergo,—this money is unholy; corollary,—I can not avail myself of my father's bequest."

"I think," criticized the vicar, "that your second premise is a little obscure."

"My mother's commentaries reduce it to noon-day clearness," declared the logician.

"May you not eventually regret this—this chiv-

alric abnegation?" propounded his mentor, "in the event of marriage, for example."

The younger started, then regained his indifferent bearing. "I hope not," he replied; "however, I am about to add to my resources a profession, once the occupation of that illustrious nation, the Jews. I allude to brickmaking."

"Paul!" ejaculated Patrick Stuart.

"It is quite true," asseverated the other calmly. "Cary is leaving us, and I am going to give an eye to the business myself. Under these circumstances, I have rejoiced my mother's heart by accepting a small salary out of the earnings of the mill."

"And abandoning your pen?"

"Not in the least," decided Paul; "that has prospered in my hand, and seems likely to go on doing so; I am a budding capitalist. No, I shall only enter the province of Goshen on Fridays and Saturdays, to pay wages and balance books. Cary has found me a brother Scot for whom he vouches, without enthusiasm, yet also without circumlocution. So everything is as it should be."

"Have you ever realized, Paul," asked the vicar, "that you are actually a very odd person?"

"Am I?" responded his *protégé*, and fell upon thought.

"Is your engagement to supervise the brick-making enterprise not—not likely," asked Patrick Stuart, "to prove in the end irksome, to—to—?"

"To an essential *dilettante* such as I?—perhaps so. Yet there is a promising precedent—when the plague of darkness fell upon Egypt it was in the land of Goshen that there was light."

The vicar smiled. "I can break a lance with you at argument," he rejoined, "but you are my master in analogy. Only, as you know, the comparative is the dangerous method."

The other had risen and was overhauling a row of book-titles.

"Lend me a bit of print," he said. "I seem to have lost touch with my own demure collection. Where do you keep your poetry?—I fancy something a trifle maddish."

The vicar indicated the press—verbally. Paul surveyed the shelves. He put out a finger and thumb and took down a thin yet handsome quarto.

"Poe," he remarked; "what a glorious get-up;—archaic prints, though."

"Yes," admitted Patrick Stuart; "it dates back to the days of peg-top trousers and decent wood-engraving. Are the verses maddish enough for you?"

The student was turning the stiff pages. "Arabesque interrogation-points carved on tombstones," he said, "but 'Annabel Lee' is immortal. When I was a round-eyed, big-headed cubling, the slave of a Dutch grease-agent—those were the days before we fell heir to the land of Goshen—I read the poem in a dingy library-book one doleful November evening; and when I came to

the lines about 'the angels up in heaven went envying her and me.' I gave a lachrymose gulp that dwells in my memory yet. The statement was so frightfully succinct. I had a bad habit of snivelling in those times; not pusillanimously, of course—the throb of sympathy woke, vibrated into pain, and there were tears. My mother has the faculty still—a word or a glance tender beyond the common wets her eyes in a twinkling."

He tucked the book under his arm. "I can borrow this?" he inquired.

"Certainly," said the vicar, "but have pity on my margins—my pet Milton is a thing of horror, thanks to your misplaced humor."

Paul laughed and carried off the volume. Elsie was waiting for him in the hall.

"Mr. Gotch," she began, "I was rude to you just now; I apologize!"

"My dear Elsie!" said Paul, deprecatingly, but the blind girl insisted.

"I was, I was, I was!" she repeated; "and I was a contemptible little minx, too: I tried to break a promise I had made. That will do, Mr. Gotch, thank you." And she returned up-stairs with much dignity, to call down from the landing, "I was wrong about Tommie; he was evidently quite fond of you."

Paul went away, saddened by a wondering reflection. He had asked himself what would become of the other's arch gaiety under the blow that was in store for her.

The crux of the problem was not long postponed. That same night Elsie crept out to the sandstone wall whose breast-high parapet divided for her the Real and the Ideal. Allan Cary had already gained the trysting-place.

The blind girl was in a coquettish mood. "I am sorry I wasn't here first," she said; "I'd have scolded you finely, fairy prince. Tell me, is there a moon?"

"Ay, a real bonnie yin," said the dwarf.

"*S-s-h!*" whispered Elsie; "speak low. I will tell you something, fairy prince. I am afraid of the moon. It is a mystery—a great, cold, smooth mystery, high up in the air. Only fairies are not afraid of her. Sad stories always have a moon in them. Justine has told me a few; those where the lovers don't get one another, where men fight, and horses gallop, and women scream. And then everything is quiet again and the moon comes out, and it grows colder and colder till you scream and waken up, and it's only a story, after all."

"Ye shouldna think o' sic things," said the Scot, anxiously.

"Oh, it's not so bad as I make out," confessed Elsie. "Sometimes I like it, just as I like your songs—the sorrowful ones that bring a lump up in my throat—'Wae's me for the 'oor, Willie,' and the rest of them."

Allan Cary dashed his hand to his eyes.

"Sing me that one, fairy prince," demanded the petulant voice.



"Onything but that," said the dwarf, brokenly; "onything but that!"

"Why not?" inquired Elsie; "I often sing it to myself, especially that bit about 'Wae's me for the destiny that gart me luvè thee sae.' I asked Justine what destiny was, and she said 'Fate,' and fate is like all sorts of things, but most like a big wind that blows and blows and blows, and you've just to go with it. Fate is like the moon, a mystery—you can never puzzle it out." She broke off. "You talk now," she said, "I've told you enough."

The Scot nerved himself to the ordeal.

"I hae a favor t' ask ye," he said.

"Yes, what?" responded the blind girl.

"Ye mind," went on Allan Cary, "the promise I gie'd ye no' tae leave ye till ye should send me awa?"

"Of course I do," returned Elsie; "I never felt certain of you before. But as Mr. Gotch says, men must keep their promises—women can if they choose to. At least, that is what he meant."

"Weel," said the dwarf, "I want ye tae gie me that promise back again."

"Certainly not," declared Elsie; "and I really didn't think you'd get tired of me so soon."

"I weary o' ye!" cried the Scot tempestuously; "my God! it's teirin' me heirt oot tae bid ye let me gae—dinna ye mock me."

"O-o-oh!" said Elsie, with a coo of infinite penitence and compassion; "I didn't mean it, fairy

prince; I didn't mean it, really. But I can't let you go—don't, don't ask me to!"

"Then I maun gae withoot yer leave," said Allan Cary, brokenly; "I hae dune ye a cruel wrang, and I maun e'en break ma word tae set a' richt again. But dinna ye think I can forget ye—dinna ye think that."

Elsie gasped, caught at her full white throat, and sank shuddering upon the wall.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she cried, chokingly. "I knew you were never really mine—never! Go back to your own place, fairy prince; I will stop here and let the moon make me colder and colder until I die."

Allan Cary struggled with his misery. Elsie caught a pathetic sound.

"Oh, I am cruel!" she said dejectedly; "it's as hard for you as it is for me, isn't it? Fate has got hold of you, and it's no use fighting; I will be brave. Have your promise back again. Now you can go away without breaking your word, like a true knight; and I can die without being ashamed of myself."

"Dinna speak o' deein'!" begged the dwarf; "if ye wad hae me curse the day I saw the licht, tell me I hae made ye loth to live."

"Why should I want to live?" asked Elsie weakly; "you are going away forever—I shall fancy you are dead, too."

Allan Cary was silent. A woman's soul is

bird-like and frail; this one might slip out of life so easily.

"Listen!" he said; "wad it mak ye ony happier if I promised ye a sign that I am no deid?"

Elsie breathed a sigh of relief at the implied division of the victory.

"Send me a gnome once a month to tell me that you are alive and love me," she offered, "and I will do anything you wish."

"I hae nae gnomes tae sen' ye," said the Scot, "but yince a month I'll sen' ye a flooer, and ye'll ken it comes fra me. If it disna come for twa months together, I'll hae passed awa. And if I can, I'll wait for ye on the ither side; an' if there is nae ither side, I shall hae rest from my punishment."

"Punishment!" answered Elsie; "have you done something dreadful, like the Wandering Jew?"

"Ay," said the dwarf, "I hae stolen a young thing's heirt out o' her bosom and her peace with it. An' sae I hae lost my ain peace for ever."

"That's me," whispered the blind girl; "never mind, fairy prince; I am really quite absurdly happy. I shall know that you are somewhere loving me, and if I cry over it, I shall be enjoying myself in a fashion. Don't be silly and blame yourself, fairy prince, because it's all fate, and fate is a bigger mystery than the moon. You'll kiss me good-bye, fairy prince?"

"Gin yell'll let me," said Allan Cary, huskily.

Elsie held out her arms. A pair of bearded lips met hers in the darkness, then parted from them, and she was standing alone by the sandstone wall with the poplars shivering overhead.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE KING OF TERRORS

THE low-ceiled room, whose wide bay window held Paul Gotch's oaken work-table, was no longer the abode of quiet thought and patient labor. A shadow haunted it—the shadow of a man who had passed its door but once in life and once in death. The strengthless ghosts of memory are often more persistent than those of superstition; enter it when Paul would, the place seemed tenanted. Once a board creaked under his foot, and recollection photographed upon his retina the powerful figure of the mysterious Christopher: square shoulders, acute eyes, assertive mouth, the salient features of a vigorous frame and striking physiognomy. Upon the settee was a dull patch or two, where the dripping body of the drowned had taken the gloss from the leather; imagination blotted them out all too easily by a phantasm of the rigid limbs and strenuous torso, gallant as those of Velasquez's "Dead Warrior." Selina Gotch, more hostile and no less sensitive than her son, shunned the apartment for some while. Paul



fretted unprofitably over his pen, and lost himself in interminable reveries.

It was upon such a mood that Allan Cary broke with his farewell.

"I've seen yer mithers," he said abruptly, pausing in the middle of the floor; "she sent me in here. I was for gettin' awa without troubling ye; I hae had ma fill o' pairtin's."

Paul left his chair and grasped both the dwarf's hands in his own.

"It wouldn't have been kind to leave me out, Allan," he protested.

"Maybe no," answered Allan Cary, dispiritedly; "weel, guid-bye t'ye."

"Mayn't I know where you are going?" asked the younger.

"I dinna ken," returned the Scot.

"You'll write to me, then," entreated Paul.

The dwarf shook his head. "I maun forget ye," he said, "it's the only way; ye're ower near—her; I hae gi'en a promise already I sair misdoot the wisdom o'. Dinna bind me tae ma folly wi' any mair."

"Very well," said Paul; "since you wish it, you shall shake off the dust of your feet against me and my house. Good-bye and good luck to you, Allan; our friendship has been very pleasant."

"Ye're richt," muttered Allan Cary; "it tak's nae toll o' a man's peace that his heirt has been warmed in the light o' anither man's countenance.

'Tis like the blessing of God, 'at mak's rich and brings nae sorrow with it. The heirt 'at turns itself toward a woman is like the bird 'at sings wi' its briest to a thorn; eh, but the sang is bonny, and the stound is sweet."

He stopped to listen hungrily.

"Did ye hear that?" he said.

"What was it?" asked the other.

"*Her* voice," whispered the dwarf; "she hasna come tae see ye, surely."

"It is hardly probable," said Paul, marveling.

Allan Cary caught his arm in a grip of steel. "I maun be fey," he said, sibilantly, "there 'tis again."

"Then I am, too," said Paul, "for I could have sworn that none other than Elsie Stuart had spoken.

As they strained their attention the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Gotch's little maid came in, announcing: "Two ladies to see you, sir." The women who entered were Justine Dupin and Elsie Stuart.

Allan Cary drew back, clutching nervously at his soft hat. His eyes met Paul's—beseeching, tragic, the white spark of agony in them. The next moment, realizing that Elsie was accompanied, he slipped behind a broad four-fold screen.

"Good-morning, Mr. Gotch," said Elsie. Paul started; both at the forced animation of the tone and the utter dejection of the usually lively little figure. "I have come to see you at last—and

without an invitation. Justine can go and talk to your mother, who is very nice indeed; we have been speaking to her in the hall. She thought we wanted a subscription."

"I am very sorry," put in Mrs. Gotch from the threshold; "but hearing you were from the vicarage—"

"Quite so," conceded Elsie; "I tell papa we have far too many beggars going around for St. Faith's, it's disgraceful. And you really won't mind me seeing Mr. Gotch alone on a matter of business—just for a moment; he's a great friend of my father's, you know."

"Not in the least," remarked Selina Gotch; "come, Miss Dupin, let me show you my chickens, I have quite a lot; it is my one hobby."

"Then you have always fresh eggs," said Justine, practically; "I would love them for Elsie." And she swept her black silk skirts from the room.

Paul put his visitor into a comfortable chair and paused beside her, anxious for the tortured Cary, and hazarding useless guesses at Elsie's mission.

The blind girl mused, her embarrassment showing itself in her face.

"You know, Mr. Gotch," she began tentatively, "that I am very ignorant."

"Circumstances have been exceptionally cruel to you, my poor Elsie," said Paul.

"That doesn't help me, does it?" inquired Elsie,

at a tangent; "I am ignorant—shamefully!—and I want you to explain something."

"I am quite at your service," was the somewhat indiscreet response.

"Then," said the blind girl, rising quickly, "what is it to be dead?"

Paul Gotch was taken aback.

"Dead!" he repeated, "surely you know."

"Surely I don't know," flounced Elsie. "When I ask Justine she says, '*N'importe, chérie,*' and when I pout, she says, 'One is whisked off to fairy-land, *voilà tout!*' When I ask Dearie he says, 'God takes us to be with Him for ever, my child;' and when Dearie talks about God he doesn't believe a word he says. What is a funeral, Mr. Gotch?"

"Tell me first," Paul stipulated, "why you want to know so much all of a sudden."

"Why?" cried Elsie; "oh, because—because some one I care a good deal for said—oh, well, we've all got to die; Dearie tells us so in his sermons, and I want to know what dying is."

Her elected authority noticed by chance the volume of Poe on the edge of the table, and shrank from sowing in this delicate intellect the seed which had brought forth such horrors in the poet's mind. Yet the nebulous is often more terrible than the precise.

"When we die, Elsie," he said slowly, "we cease to be part of the world of living, thinking,

acting men and women, and our spirits fly away——”

“What are our spirits?” he was interrupted, to be further posed by the remark: “If you’re not going to be honest, Mr. Gotch, I shall go back to Justine at once, and I shall dislike you extremely ever afterwards. I can always feel when people are just—parroting—there, I’ve said it, and I don’t care!”

Paul gathered his dispersed wits.

“I beg your pardon,” he returned; “I will tell you as much of the truth as I know. Death is something that no one can explain, just as life is something that no one comprehends. When we die, all that is peculiarly ourselves leaves us—we do not eat or drink or walk or recognize our friends; we are silent and still, as if we were sleeping. In a short time what of us is left would begin to pass away, too, as snow does under your fingers. So while it is yet what the living knew and loved, they put it from them and think only of the man or woman who was so dear to them.”

“What do they do with it?” queried Elsie, fearfully.

“In some countries they burn it,” said Paul, with considerable trepidation; “in most Christian ones it is laid very gently in a great chest lined with cushions and buried in the ground, and the grass and the flowers grow over the place where



it lies, and the trees bend over it and the rain sheds tender tears over it."

The blind girl shuddered. "Is that all?" she said: "I think I guessed that much."

"All that we are certain of," owned her preceptor; "but the world has never really believed that that was the end. Just as this town is not the only town, so our earth is not the only planet in the sky. It has always been trusted that we live again elsewhere in a happier and a better world."

"Some of us," said Elsie; "you mean heaven—what about—*h'm!*—you know."

"Yes," answered Paul, sadly; "men have also imagined a place of punishment for the wicked. But if we do live a conscious existence again, that will be because there is a God, and a God that understands everything. We are only unlucky mites, we men; if He is, He is God, and He will pity us."

"So it's only a chance, after all," concluded Elsie.

"To be more frank than most people dare be, yes," said Paul.

Elsie meditated deeply.

"Thank you," she observed at length; "it's a weight off my mind—I don't think I'm afraid any more. Still, it's better to live, isn't it?—it may be all there is for us."

"That is so," said the expositor; "and the

thought is the mainspring of all human endeavor."

"Do you believe in God?" pursued Elsie.

Paul pondered.

"Candidly," he admitted, "I regard Him as a Probability of the highest order; once or twice at important moments in my life I have staked heavily on that Probability."

"You are a very honest person," was Elsie's final comment. She turned about. "There's Justine come back for me," she said.

Paul held his breath. Allan Cary, moving with stealthy steps had crossed the room and gained the unlatched door. As he drew it ajar the hinge had creaked and provoked Elsie's concluding remark. He looked at the blind girl as he stepped out—a look passionate and pitiful to the limits of expression—and made to Paul a lingering gesture of farewell.

"No," said Elsie, after a pause, "it's my mistake. I have another favor to ask you, Mr. Gotch; take me to one of these places where they put the dead people."

Paul demurred. The blind girl insisted.

"I only want to know if it feels any different," she vouchsafed.

"But Justine will object," temporized Paul.

"We won't tell her," was Elsie's solution of the difficulty; "you can just say you're taking me for a jaunt—papa is always telling me to go for jaunts."

Before this ingenious determination her host was impotent; he went to the sitting-room and gave a diplomatic version of Elsie's message. Justine shrugged her shoulders.

"You see how wilful a *bébé* mine is, Madame," she expounded to Mrs. Gotch: "*eh bien*, I will walk myself a little, and come again for Elsie when she shall have returned."

"Nay," said Paul, "I will bring Elsie to the vicarage myself."

"Not too late, that is understood," cautioned Miss Dupin, seriously.

"Quite," asseverated the custodian, and took himself off, glad not to be further questioned as to his charge's whim.

"This is where you make your bricks, isn't it?" asked Elsie, clasping his arm as they traversed the clayfield.

"Where they are made for us," said her guide.

"That's what I meant," retorted the blind girl: "is it a nice business?"

"The mill does most of it," intimated Paul; "the thing responsible for that noise you may have noticed. In the old days brickmaking was a very sloppy process—men and boys and water *ad lib.* Now the pug-mill does it nearly all."

"Then how do the men and boys get a living now?" queried Elsie.

"An economic problem of the worst sort, Miss Wisdom; in the language of the discreet political

scientist, they have been absorbed by other industries. Here is our tram."

He piloted the blind girl to a corner, and they talked of indifferent matters. A brief ride brought them to the massive pillars and entrance gates of the cemetery to which Paul Gotch had journeyed under such diverse circumstances. As they walked down the principal avenue, he told Elsie of his father's strange visit and singular death.

"I'm so sorry I asked you all those questions," said his companion, "it only reminded you."

"No," decided Paul; "I think it helped to clear off some of the haze in my mind."

"And he is buried here?" inquired Elsie; "take me to it, please."

The son of Christopher Gotch directed their course towards the still virgin portion of the great enclosure. His father's grave was as yet a strip of ruddy earth, the sign that a superstructure was intended: head and coping-stones were in preparation, though Selina Gotch did not know of it.

"Is this the place?" inquired Elsie, feeling that Paul stopped.

Her guide assented. The blind girl stood reflectively for a space.

"Y-yes," she said; "it makes one feel sad—and cold. Are there a lot of people buried here?"

"A vast multitude," answered Paul.

"Poor things!" sighed Elsie.

Paul did not answer; he had turned towards the grave where the woman Frances Latimer had been buried; it was already covered with green turf—no costly monument loomed on its horizon. The arm upon which Elsie leaned was trembling; a sudden commotion had sprung up about the man's heart. By the verdant mound which swelled over that bewept coffin, a woman lay—a woman who was very, very still. He knew her for his black-robed queen of tragedy. Though why his heart beat so wildly he could not have told.

"Elsie," he said, with dry lips, "close to us there is a—a young lady—by a grave; I—I think she has fainted."

"Then take me to her," said Elsie; "Justine faints sometimes—after a row with Dearie—and I always bring her round myself. Then you can run and get some water."

Paul led the groping Samaritan across the sward. The woman was indeed she whom he had seen in the church a few days earlier. Elsie's fingers touched a soft bosom; she knelt down and they traveled to a pale face. Then she made a lap and lifted the relaxed shoulders into it.

"Quick," she cried, "the water."

Paul ran fiercely; a cottage was not far off, about it a sweep of youngling shrubbery—the material for future plantations. No one was within; the seeker found a tap and a glass, and hurried back with the cool fluid.



Elsie had freed the throat of her unconscious patient; she heard her emissary's step, and drew the wrappings to with hovering maternal fingers. Paul stooped and held the glass to Elsie's hand; she dipped her fingers in it and wetted the low, wide forehead. Presently there was a long and hopeless respiration.

"Go away," ordered Elsie; "she'll be afraid of you."

The command was obeyed; the blind girl was mistress of the situation.

Her patient stirred in the protecting arms, cried "Where am I?" and sat up.

"S-s-sh!" said Elsie, clinging to her cautiously; "it's all right; you went off, you know, and I brought you to. But please don't run away, because I'm blind, and your collar wants fastening."

"I don't understand," objected a tremulous voice; "how did you know I had fainted if you are blind?"

"I had a gentleman with me," announced Elsie, cheerfully, "and he saw you. So first I sent him for some water and then I sent him about his business. May I call him back? He's really very nice. You needn't be afraid of either of us; I'm Mr. Stuart's daughter, the vicar of St. Faith's, and he is a great friend of my father's. May I call him?"

"Oh, yes, please," answered the patient, who was presentable once more.

"Mr. Gotch," summoned Elsie, "you can take the man his glass back now."

"With pleasure," said Paul, and stepped up again. The other of the sighted persons rose to her feet, or rather tried to, for she swayed and stumbled, to be caught by a strong hand.

"I'm afraid you are not yet quite fit to move," its owner warned her. Their eyes met, and he saw that she recognized him.

"Dear me," exclaimed the blind girl, "is she going off again?"

"No, oh, no," was the unsteady reply; "I'm not faint now—I—I think it's because I haven't had any breakfast or dinner."

"*Juste ciel!*" said Elsie, who had a polyglot vocabulary; "you must be starving! Mr. Gotch, please get us out of this place and find a quick way home. What is your name, my dear?"

"Hero Latimer," replied the other, "but I couldn't think of——"

Elsie cut into the foolish proud sentence.

"Really, Miss Latimer," she declared, "you musn't; I love having visitors. Take this glass back, Mr. Gotch; if it is on our road, take us, too."

Paul gave his arm to the dictatress; he had not as yet looked straight at Hero for as much as might amount to one whole minute.

"Now, my dear child," said Elsie, when Paul left them to restore the stolen article and to tip

the astonished keeper—"you are a child, aren't you?"

"I am nineteen," returned Hero, a little stiffly.

"And I'm nineteen hundred," retorted Elsie—"when you've got incipient spinal curvature, days sometimes count a million to the dozen; I'm blind and I'm queer; I always want my own way, and I always get it; I've no sisters or brother or mother; only a father and Justine, who looks after me. But she is out, and I've got a darling room of my own. So come home with me and see my cat Tommie, with hair as long as mine, and tell me your troubles."

Hero Latimer studied the strange figure beside her.

"I am very sorry," she began; "it all sounds fearfully miserable."

"And yet I am not," retorted Elsie, obscurely; "*buvons, mangeons, chansons, rions*, which is to say, drink, eat, sing, and laugh; it's no good making faces. And now here's Mr. Gotch, so we'll soon be home. Mr. Gotch, you can take us there in a cab?"

"Please," besought Hero, but Elsie was adamant, and into a four-wheeler they got as soon as they had passed the gates.

Paul studied the face of Hero Latimer,—the blind girl sat opposite him with their patient by her. His lady of tragedy had eyes of a gleaming, lucid blue, and her dark hair overshadowed them on brow and temples with a feathery cloud. Her

countenance was at once sad and imperious, determined and subdued. Something in it moved him deeply.

On the way to the vicarage he heard broken snatches of conversation, audible between the tormenting rattle of the conveyance. They gave him occasional glimpses into an odd feminine world.

"I was really doing my best," said Hero, who was thawing under the sunshine of Elsie's dexterous sympathies; "but I could scarcely see for crying, and my fingers were all thumbs. . . . that cheap kind of tulle that goes as limp as a rag with the least handling. . . . I would have to make it good . . . of course, it was silly—and then . . . and paid me off, and I felt that miserable——!"

"The spiteful cat!" said Elsie, with a colloquial accuracy that Paul had not given her credit for.

"So I went to be beside mother," pursued Hero, lowering her voice—they were on a bit of respectable macadam now; "and what with being so wretched and not having any lunch and only a drink of milk for my breakfast——"

"Of course, dear," said Elsie, squeezing the speaker's hand; "and now I'm going to give you something awfully tempting to eat, and you shan't think about anything but being petted and comforted."

They made a curious picture, the stunted girl so eager and fostering, the riper woman so sullen

and restrained. Yet there was a suggestion of Teuton strength about the largely-moulded lips and chin of Hero Latimer that was lacking in the acuter contours of Elsie's face. Mobility was the characteristic of the one, endurance that of the other. Also into Elsie's face there stole at times a *nuance* of expression, bizarre to the verge of madness; in Hero's blue eyes there dawned now and again a poignant sympathy, dovelike and sweet. Such a gleam of absolute, pulsating tenderness fell upon Elsie's crooked shoulders. Paul saw it, and a pang of covetousness burned at his heart.

Arrived at St. Faith's, he paid the driver of the cab, and would have taken his departure, but Elsie stayed him.

"Come and have some tea, Mr. Gotch," she requested; "you can talk to Miss Latimer while I go and coax the people in the kitchen."

Paul ascended to the upper levels of the vicarage with a sense of inevitableness tugging at his nerves. A few days ago he sat looking at Hero Latimer, ignorant of her name, her character, her occupation; and now he was moving beside her, his intuition that she was motherless confirmed by knowledge, and aware, moreover, that she was that pathetic being—a finely-touched woman-soul bitted and thonged by economic slavery. How quickly he had strung the beads of evidence together!—the resolute mouth and chin, the blue eyes, alternating timidity and dewy calm, the re-



vealing sob, "I went to be beside mother," the quick, proud "I couldn't think of it!"—he held her spirit in the hollow of his hand.

Palpitating with such novel thoughts, he waited alone in Elsie Stuart's jealously-guarded "den." Hero came in a moment or two after, hatless and deprived of her jacket. Elsie's swift yet varying footsteps paused at the door as her guest entered, and she called out to Paul that he was not to let Miss Latimer mope.

Paul's usual *insouciance* had fled; he could only suggest that Hero should take a seat. Miss Latimer accepted the recommendation, and both promptly became dumb. At last Hero gave herself an admonitory shake—one more token of a halting courage and a determined will.

"I think, Mr. Gotch," she said nervously, "that I have seen you before." At the word memory stung her, but her mouth set bravely.

"Pray do not pain yourself with the recollection," besought Paul.

"It—it was my mother," added Hero, as if to justify her emotion.

The young man bent his head.

"A terrible deprivation," he said, and added, out of a burning desire to be better known to her: "yet my position was even more tragic, because I can not grieve as you can. I was parting from a father whose only child was born in a work-house, a man who, five-and-twenty years ago, abandoned his wife when she most needed his

help and protection—a father who met his death because he came two thousand miles to ask a love and forgiveness which justice withheld from him. It would have been less bitter to have known and honored him all my life and, as you do, to have mourned my loss unashamed.”

Hero looked at him—interested yet puzzled by the fluent self-revelation. Lacking print or the pulpit, it roused her mute personality to a lurking disdain. Nevertheless, she was attracted by the indefinable masculine distinction which had so piqued her.

He noted her silence, translated the fractional variation of her expression, and winced. Unwittingly he revenged himself upon her.

“A beautiful day, is it not?” he inquired, descending to a most uncomplimentary depth of the conventional.

Hero’s lip twitched and her eyes ran over with amusement; she was as acute as he was.

“Days depend upon other things than the weather, you mean,” he said, a little reluctantly; “yet we have to be very miserable not to be the happier for a spring morning or an autumn afternoon with a clear sky overhead and the frost on the grass. Even the prince of pessimists admitted that it is a pleasant thing for the eyes to behold the sun.”

He was talking beyond the prescribed vapidities of the *tête-à-tête*, yet he could not help it. The fastidiousness in the somewhat classic coun-

tenance galled his dominant mental qualities into an obstinate appeal for revision of the too hasty judgment passed upon them.

Hero was equally obstinate. "Suppose you've no time to think of such things?" she said, hitting the bull's eye of his æsthetic target.

"You are right," he remarked, surrendering; "an effective margin of healthy attention is necessary for the enjoyment of such pleasures. It is, alas, denied to most in the struggle for existence."

Hero studied the author of this concession. He was evidently not trying to be clever, his mouth simply opened, and a type of English she had never before encountered flowed around an idea to lend it a vexatiously adequate garb of speech. Elsie and a maid with the tea-tray saved Hero the perplexing task of a provisional judgment.

The blind girl was a most assiduous hostess, and Hero ate heartily. Under the stimulus of the meal and the excitement of the chatter, the rose-leaf tinge warmed her pale face and throbbed in her finger-tips: she had firm, small hands; Paul indexed them as yet another sign of character.

Hero did not speak often, being constrained and shy, but she kept going a vigilant analysis of Elsie's uncanny cleverness and Paul's masterful sincerity, opening her eyes at the unexpected ignorances of the one and the transient humors of the other. Both were overstrung, Elsie by the

rarity of a visitor and Paul by a feverish hope of extracting from those blue eyes some flicker of predilection, at the worst, of respect. Even the cultivated intellect remains primeval—squinting toward the peacock.

When she went away she had promised Elsie to repeat her visit. The blind girl pressed for a date.

"I can't say for certain," urged Hero; "you see——"

"Oh, of course," said Elsie, in a stage aside; "you'll be rather unsettled for a bit, won't you? But you must let me know how you go on, dear; I shall be quite worried about you."

Hero made the desired engagement hastily, surprised to find that Paul insisted upon playing escort.

They parted, these two, twice so strangely brought together by Fate, in front of a despondent house in a mean street.

"Good-night," said Hero; "and thank you for taking so much trouble. Please thank Miss Stuart again for me."

Paul held out his hand; Hero touched it with a vague misgiving.

"Good-night," he answered; "I—I couldn't help hearing that you are in some doubt as to the future. It is a brutal world for women—I wish I could offer to help you. But you are proud, and we are strangers. Yet I, too, am anxious for you—you were not made to buffet with the

laws of supply and demand. I could wish you a very sheltered and gracious life. Forgive me for saying so much. Good-bye."

He watched till the door closed behind her. Some moments after he was still standing, lost in thought.



## CHAPTER X

### A MONOLOGUE AND SOME IMPERTINENCES

IT would have been well for Paul Gotch if at this juncture he could have taken counsel of a woman. Instead, he communed with his own heart and with the night. Over the trim threshold of Self, Love sprang, and fled, carrying its rosy torch, from cavernous strait to strait of personality. And to that gay beacon there trooped a *mêlée* of quintessential imaginations—fear, jealousy, solicitude, conjecture, hope deferred, ardor spurring prudence, homage leading passion blindfold; all the misty faction of Romance grew lambent and flashed and flickered down the corridors of thought. The man's soul tracked them in a blinking ecstasy.

The morning dawned—a regal June day—a First Day. A dozen bells wagged their iron tongues remotely—a ripple of ordered notes between from the north-west, where a square Norman tower housed an ancient peal. The city slumbered in the sun; its indifference fretted Paul's exaltation. He donned a rumpled cos-

tume, consecrated to indolence, and walked out into the clayfield.

A puny butterfly—one of the common greenish-white variety—was drifting hither and thither over a ragged oasis of turf. He pondered its erratic flight.

“As a caterpillar,” he said to it, “you crawled where you would, in reason, and doubtless your Lilliput wanderings met provender enough. Your wings were a Greek gift; they have made you the sport of every zephyr that lacks a toy. And I who moralize over you am busy unpacking my pinions to wrestle with forces no less mighty. My chrysalis has burst, too, little butterfly; I am in love. My independence, like yours, is escheat to Nature; I am no longer a philosophic integer, I am a discontented decimal. What a rout of maimed comparisons! Adieu, little butterfly, a sunny third act to your trivial drama and—a quick curtain.”

A second white flake danced up, and the two morsels of existence fluttered about one another.

“Good God!” said Paul, with a sudden ferocious humor, “may it not be that atomy number one is vowing eternal loyalty to atomy number two, and atomy number two is—credulous! Truly Pythagoras had more respect for the spiritual than to surrender nine-tenths of life to the automatic. Reincarnations of Romeo and Juliet, immutable heirs of mutability, count me with Pythagoras, and wanton unchallenged by a brag-

gart materialism. Are not the heavens propitious, is not the air calm?—he loves you, testy demoiselle, and Time is very short. Coquette, coquette!—you are no less marvelous than the gray matter of Plato's brain, your death no less profound a tragedy than the passing of Socrates."

He strolled back to the cottage and lunched with his mother. As soon as the meal was over he dressed carefully and made ready to go out.

"Are you going across to Mr. Stuart's?" asked Mrs. Gotch, a trifle of envy pointing the interrogation.

Paul laughed.

"Not this journey," he replied; "I propose calling on a new acquaintance—I don't know if I shall be away long or not."

Mrs. Gotch took to the lounge and a book.

Paul set off alertly; his destination was no other than the house to which he had, on the previous day, escorted Hero Latimer. When, however, he had turned into the sordid street—grubbily decorous in its Sunday calm—his limbs were trembling and his mouth parched. A child ran to his knock; he asked with dry lips for "Miss Latimer," and his pulses halted.

"I'll tell her," said the mite, affably; the caller's heart beat again.

He stepped into a tawdry parlor, smelling of furniture polish and hereditary chattels. There were indistinct framed photographs and colored "enlargements" by way of wall decorations, a

tinsel cascade hid the grate; on the mantel, glass shades protected unnatural waxen stacks of fruit and flowers. Paul's spirits steadied themselves to resist the doleful influences of the place.

A footfall sounded on the creaking kitchen stair, and Hero entered, astonished to see him. Paul noticed that she wore a black silk blouse and a skirt of an odd, girlish type; they lent her a youthful, modern aspect—in her ampler mourning garments she had showed singularly classic and mature.

"You will be surprised at this visit," he began confusedly.

"Y-yes," admitted Hero; he imagined a rebuke in her tone.

"I—I could not help coming," pursued Paul; "I have been thinking about you all last night and this morning."

He paused, but was given no assistance.

"You seemed so unhappy," he murmured, "it is not right that you should be at the mercy of unreasonable employers or of unsuitable friends."

Hero projected a repulse.

"I need have no friends that I don't choose," she said. Yet her face softened after the completed speech—it had proved more discourteous in the implication than she had foreseen.

"Unfortunately, accident makes them for us," dissented Paul; "it is very natural that the socially-handicapped who have been generously endowed with personal qualities should prefer asso-

ciation with those beneath them in character and ability to a temporarily more exacting intercourse with their equals. Progressive deterioration is inevitable under such conditions. 'Let noble minds keep ever with their like,' said Shakespeare's much-misunderstood Polonius." He checked himself—the retort had become a soliloquy.

"It was nice of you to come," said Hero, politely, "but I am afraid I must get back to my work—you see, I have to make myself useful."

Paul wrinkled his brow.

"At least," he pleaded, "let me say why I have thus intruded upon you." He got a chair for her; she accepted it with reluctance, twirling a slender ornament on her finger—he stooped and looked at the trifle daringly.

"You wear a ring," he said, and breathed hard; "Miss Latimer, forgive my asking a question which means to me more than I can say. Is that ring a pledge of affection?"

Hero chafed visibly.

"Oh, I have no right to put such a question," he cried; "I am unbearably impertinent; but you will tell me, Miss Latimer. If—if that jewel was given you by a friend who may some day be more than a friend, I will ask your pardon and go away, and you shall never see me again. My misery and my madness will be nothing to you."

Hero stared at him with wide, unbelieving eyes—a spasm of alarm shook their clear gaze.



"I am in earnest," said Paul Gotch, quivering-ly, "absurd as I may appear to you, I am in such earnest as it is given to few men to be. If I inquired flippantly or without respect, you would have a right to refuse me an answer or to evade the question with an easy lie. But you dare not do that—you have other defenses against my presumption if you should need them. There are some natures that may speak each to each as readily out of mystery as out of familiarity; we are what would be called strangers, but I know more of your soul than another would know if he had spent a lifetime with you. It is because I have seen into you and know you, that you will tell me who gave you that ring."

The girl was mastered by the vibrating sentences, and touched—to an infinitesimal degree—by the spasmodic feeling that distorted the speaker's face. She tried to smile, but wept instead.

"It was my mother's," she sobbed.

Paul's dynamic intensity passed from him into space—he fell on one knee beside her.

"Cruel! cruel that I was!" he ejaculated, with an extravagant joy; "forgive me, I—I was reckless, foolish—the poor little pearls! I should have known."

The storm of tears had left Hero's cheeks dripping as a poplar drips in an April shower. She sought for her handkerchief, found none, and blushed. Paul drew from his breast-pocket an immaculate square—still neatly folded as he had

picked it up—shook it out with amazing self-possession and put it into her fingers.

Hero regarded him with an indignation which verged on the farcical, but at this point the tears overflowed again. In her embarrassment she used the handkerchief. Paul availed himself of the fact to proceed.

“I gathered yesterday that you are motherless,” he said, “and probably also fatherless. You are now about to seek for fresh employment in your occupation, and, unstimulated by your mother’s companionship, to mingle with your intellectual inferiors and to subside insensibly into a toleration of their incapacity and of your own inertia. The crisis is, you will admit, a momentous one, and that alone can excuse my uninvited presence here, to say nothing of the proposition I am about to make.”

Hero was listening, behind the pocket-handkerchief.

“I am a man of four-and-twenty,” continued Paul, “with a fair income and an even temper. These are the sole practical inducements that I can urge on behalf of my request. A single unpractical appeal I can add to them—the old and hackneyed one, I—I love you.”

Hero Latimer shrank to the limits of her seat, dropping the handkerchief precipitately. Paul trembled.

“I have been a quiet, studious sort of person all my life,” he said, pleadingly; “women have

been to me merely the subjects of an occasional trite cynicism, a spurious omniscience. My father, as I told you, deserted my mother before I was born; my early years accustomed me to dispense with all emotional or material superfluities. A week or two ago our prodigal came back—he had heard of me and was drawn towards me—I sent him away, doing my mother the only justice I could. He died by accident, trying to see me privately. That opened my heart; I was restless, eager, seeking I knew not what. In such a moment you passed—tragic, black-robed, pitiful—and my heart closed with your image in it. You passed again; my heart opened again—your image faded, and my heart cried out for you—you yourself, who will not fade.”

“Indeed!” interpolated Hero, stemming the tide of fantasy. The dark eyes read her mind; they dilated, shining with an unearthly dread.

“Not that,” begged the man at her feet, cowering as from a blow, “not that!” A little time—only a little time before you say it! If you were near a drowning man and he called to you for help, you might not be able to give it to him, but you would not put out your soft white palm to push him down—down under the black water. If you were the captain of a firing-party and a poor devil of a spy asked you for a moment—a moment to breathe his sweetheart’s name and think of all that should have been—you might

cry, 'Ready, present!'—you dare not finish it—you dare not! Have some mercy; do not answer lightly. I have had such thoughts—thoughts of Eden and romance: I knew why God made man, I forgave Him death."

He dragged himself up, panting.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered; "I think I lost myself just then."

His forehead was wet, and his breast heaving. Hero studied him, fascinated, overawed, yet, as he had said, cold.

"Of course you are right," he gasped; "it was a mad scheme, but I meant well. I want you to believe that."

"Oh, I do! I do!" cried Hero, melting; "I am so sorry, but really, I have only met you twice before."

A strident query interrupted her, penetrating from below.

"Hero Latimer!" demanded a voice—an ominous, insolent voice; "are you ever going to finish these dishes, I'd like to know?"

Hero's face darkened; the eclipse repeated itself on Paul's countenance. A sense of desolation bowed the figure in the silk blouse.

"Now go," she besought, "or I shall get into trouble, and I can't afford to quarrel with them just now. They are not bad people, truly, they helped my mother."

"May I not see you again?" said Paul, miserably.

"Yes, yes," consented Hero; "only do go now."

Paul snatched at the permission, and went; on the step he caught a reluctant hand, and kissed it burningly. The latch snapped—a disdainful, metallic click—and Hero hurried down-stairs.

Once again Paul lingered—nor was he the first to pluck a chilly comfort from the neighborhood of an inhospitable threshold. While he brooded, pacing a short beat, over the equivocal interview which had so abruptly terminated, a door banged and some one ran out into the silent thoroughfare. The fugitive's skirts brushed against him—they were Hero's.

"Mr. Gotch!" she said.

"I was going in a moment," mumbled Paul.

Hero looked at him closely. "Why—why were you waiting about?" she insisted. Paul could find no response less jejune than his position, and that was pregnant with the ridiculous.

"Listen," added Hero Latimer, hysterically; "you spoke the truth. Such people aren't fit to live with. She struck me, and—and called me hideous names. I don't love you, but if you wish you can take me away. I don't know where I was going when I came out—to do something silly, I suppose."

Paul answered soothingly, collectedly.

"You shall never regret your confidence in me," he said; "if you can trust yourself to go back for your hat, I will take you at once to see my mother."



Hero went slowly up the few steps and knocked. A response was not forthcoming, she waited hopelessly; angered and ashamed, she returned to Paul. "It's no good," she said vehemently; "I'm locked out."

"Then," decided her new guardian, "we will find a hansom."

And in such strange fashion did Paul Gotch bring home his betrothed.

## CHAPTER XI

### AN INEFFECTIVE DEMURRER

PAUL GOTCH was striding over the clayfields towards the white cottage, humming the bluff chorus of the "Yeoman's Wedding." The morning air fanned him exhilaratingly, the rustling tarns of black water lent it a sharp, enigmatic flavor. He ascended the rubble walk, gained the lobby and hung up his hat.

"Margaret," he called towards the back of the house; "will you ask my mother if she can see me?"

"Yes, sir," said Margaret, coming into the passage; "she is in the parlor, sir, with the young lady."

Margaret spoke with wan deliberation; a sharp-toothed devil was gnawing at her pleasurable regard of him.

Paul went into his own room, opened the windows, and chirruped to the canary. Selina Gotch came behind him; he turned and kissed her boyishly.

"How is the little woman?" he asked.

"Having her breakfast," answered Mrs. Gotch, with prosaic accuracy.

"I—I couldn't bring myself to face Stuart's smile," said her son; "so I just ran down to the North Western; it was easier. Besides, I wanted to go to the bank this morning."

He took out his pocket-book and extracted a packet of notes.

"Should I give her these myself?" he inquired, with some disquietude, "or tell her you will see to everything of that sort?"

"She would probably like it better from you," was Mrs. Gotch's grave verdict. Selina was very quiet and studiously non-committal; Paul felt it.

"Mother," he said, putting a hand on each of her thin shoulders, "you are good to her for my sake, be good to her for her own."

Selina Gotch's face did not alter its calm expression. "She is a nice, lady-like girl," was her rejoinder; "we shall get on very comfortably. It is you who are taking risks."

"True, oh, queen," said Paul, gaily; "nothing venture, nothing win. Can I go to her now?"

"I suppose so," replied his mother; "when do you want it to be?"

"As soon as I can fix things up," said Paul; "we shall run away for a few days, come back here and settle down."

"Here!" repeated Selina Gotch; "is that wise?"

"Of course," said Paul; "do you think I am going to leave you to your own devices? My dear soul, you would get the big blue hump."

Mrs. Gotch's mouth worked.

"I don't want you to think of me," she urged.

"Rubbish!" said Paul; "and now let me go to my pretty captive."

He stepped across the passage and entered the other living-apartment. Hero sat over her meal, more incongruously youthful than ever in her loneliness. Her blue eyes were limpid with tears.

"Good-morning," remarked her visitor; "may I interrupt?"

"Please do," cried Hero; "I am glad you've come."

"Not more glad," said Paul, ardently, "than I am to hear you say so."

"Oh, I don't mean that," objected Miss Latimer; "I wanted to ask you if I couldn't go back again; I don't think I want to be married."

Paul was stunned.

"Of—of course," he whispered, hoarsely; "you are free—to do as you wish."

"Oh," begged Hero; "don't look like that, don't—you make me hate myself."

"I wouldn't have you unhappy for the world," said Paul, altering his demeanor, if anything, however, for the worse; "but you are quite sure that you desire to return to your—your protectors?"

"No, I'm not," flashed out Hero; "I'm not—I'm too selfish and too comfortable; I have had a nice breakfast, and I haven't had to get up and drag myself down to the shop; I shouldn't mind stopping in the least if—if——"

"If it wasn't for me," concluded Paul, wrung into brutality.

"Only for your own sake, though," supplemented Hero, quickly; "I like to be with you, you are very kind and—and interesting, but I shouldn't make you happy, really I shouldn't, and it is wicked of me to think of staying."

Paul came very close to her.

"Hero," he said—"I may call you Hero, may I not?"

"Yes," permitted Hero, sadly.

"If I have seemed to consider exclusively my own point of view in this matter," he pursued, with tremulous sincerity, "it has, I trust, been only so in appearance. I cling to my hold over your destiny because I believe that it is the best thing for you—for your inmost being. Those terrible women who were with you at the funeral, you know what they are actually—coarse, vulgar, rampant in emotion, foul-tongued in anger, fit mothers of the low-browed, unshaven, taciturn populace. Yet their daughters are at times what their grandmothers may have been—noble, feminine, potential. They are hectored into a sullen conformity to their sphere. They marry boors—boors of broad cloth and the ledger, boors of corduroy and the pick. What do they become? Envelopes of unlovely flesh, sealing in some moribund cell a microscopic soul."

Hero shivered—with Captain Pistol's astounded hostess she might have retorted, "By my



troth, these are very bitter words." The glowing mystery of Paul's diction lent an adventitious horror to the truth which she perceived dimly through its savage phrases.

"Whatever were to happen as a result of our marriage," added Paul, "you shall blame me for. And I will comfort myself with this, that if my love can not beget love in you, at least it can fence your nobler qualities from the devastating feet of the mob. Even if you should grow to dislike me it will take a little time, and I shall enjoy a transient happiness—not that I will force myself upon you in any way; you shall not be able to discover the limits of my humility and my obedience. If your life is to be spoiled I had rather your path led to the cliff of tragedy than to the Slough of Despond. It shall lead to neither if I can help it; yet which risk will you take, that of the catastrophe or the quagmire?"

"Oh, if you will never, never blame me, whatever happens," cried Hero, "I—I think I will stop."

Paul stooped, drew the hoop of pearls from the speaker's hand, and pushed it on to his little finger. Then he took another ring from his pocket—a ring contained in the conventional morocco case. It was set with small diamonds. Hero permitted him to slip it into the place of her mother's jewel. Her eyes shone—the stones sparkled so translucently.

"As long as I wear your ring," swore Paul,

solemnly, "whether you wear one of mine or not, I will never judge you nor think ill of you."

He touched her drooping brown head.

"And now," he said, "I have these for you," and he laid the notes on the table; "you will, of course, need a great many things. In a few days I shall have made all arrangements. Have you ever seen London?"

"Never," murmured Hero, a gleam of interest lighting up her expression.

"Would you like to spend a few days there?" asked Paul.

Hero gasped; she was *vis-à-vis* with the future. But the word London rang magically in her ears.

"Must we go away?" she thought it considerate to ask—London sounded synonymous with extravagance.

"Not if you would rather stay," she was told.

The alternative displeased her unpronounceably. "It will cost a good deal," she ventured, meaning the London journey.

"Not it," said Paul; "then we will go, providing you do not change your mind. I will ask my friend Mr. Stuart, the vicar of St. Faith's,—it was his daughter you met—to marry us. Unless you would like some other form of ceremony. I am traditionally a Nonconformist, but Stuart is such a congruous hierophant—I beg your pardon, I meant he is in the picture where such things

are concerned. Or would you care for the registry office?"

Hero whispered that she had no preference.

"Then Stuart it shall be," decided Paul; "good-bye for the present, Hero, and remember, you may shun me if you choose, hate me if you must, but you need never fear me. You shall control me with one strand of a spider's thread."

He departed without offering to salute her by any other form than that of speech, and Hero abandoned herself to tears. The thought of wedlock served, however, to set her eddying mind on fripperies. She picked up the notes. Not that she was mercenary, but the feminine mind celebrates peculiarly.

There were five of the rustling sheets and they were for ten pounds each. Between her and a certain mean house in a dingy street a mile away a gulf had opened; nor was there in the situation on her side any of those elements which bridge even such abysses. She sat down, not unhappy, and began to meditate, with indubitable consolation, the genesis of her trousseau.

## CHAPTER XII

### A DÉJEÛNER AND A DEPARTURE

"TOMMIE," said Elsie Stuart to the silver-belled Angora, "I am very happy this morning. Wake up, you sleepy, smiling thing, and listen."

With which admonition she shook the fluffy creature till it whimpered for mercy, whereat its mistress gathered it into her arms, infant-fashion, and hugged it maternally, rocking the while.

"Why am I so happy?" she continued, answering an entirely imaginary question; "because—oh, because there are some delicious, delicious flowers from my fairy prince, and because Hero is going to be married to Mr. Gotch. So I shall have two of the nicest friends to go and see when Justine and Dearie are dull, and when I am all by myself—you don't count, dear, you know—I can dream about somebody who isn't a friend, but a wonderful, beautiful mystery."

She slid the Angora into her lap, bent her head, and drew a long breath. A cluster of carnations nodding on her bosom yielded their rapturous perfume. The cat disentangled his lithe limbs, sat up, and proceeded, with one agile paw, to

smooth his furry countenance. Elsie diagnosed the quaint operation and laughed out suddenly.

"Oh, you funny, *human* animal," she cried, and began to pet it.

"Mr. Gotch, Miss Elsie," said one of the maids, showing that gentleman in. The blind girl rose and welcomed him, dropping Tommie to the floor.

"Good-morning," she remarked; "Dearie's not down yet. Isn't it impolite of him to ask you to breakfast and then to keep you waiting for it?"

"I am early, I believe," protested Paul; "as a matter of fact I have been up for hours. To be honest, I spent several of them watching a certain little house on the clayfield; otherwise I was mortally afraid it would catch fire, be whirled into space by a cyclone, or disappear by art magic."

The other clapped her hands.

"How lovely!" she said; "come and tell me all about it."

"There is no more to tell," the visitor assured her, sitting down.

"And you really are madly in love with her," propounded Elsie, standing in front of him.

"Insanely," owned Paul.

"It's very romantic," decided the blind girl; "I didn't think you had it in you—you always seemed so—so sniffy. But I like you for it, Mr. Gotch. Dearie says you are a drastic antidote to the conventional, which sounds as though it



was awfully wise, but I expect it isn't. Is Hero as happy as you are?"

"I hope so," was the reply.

"I've asked her two or three times," confessed the candid psychologist, "but she didn't say much. She holds herself in a lot, doesn't she?"

Paul sighed involuntarily; the suppressed regret of the vocal gesture warned Elsie's sensitive sympathies into good breeding. She took to a tangent.

"Please catch Tommie for me," she requested. Paul set about capturing the reluctant creature, on the heel of which operation the vicar entered, drowsy but cheerful. The British breakfast followed him, Justine appeared, exquisitely decorous, and Paul was in the midst of his last bachelor meal.

Patrick Stuart talked about the weather and the war, but under his handsome mustaches a humorous mouth was covertly rallying Paul. The day was gloriously bright, the ample windows were open, and the exhilaration of the summer air ended by moving the party to a flow of slight jests and unreasoning laughter.

The vicar pledged the young man's future in his tea-cup.

"Here's to the Benedict that is to be," he said, with gentle mockery. "I see him now, no more the strenuous philosopher, the rigid censor of the times, but sleek, contented, epicurean: I see sweet reasonableness distilling from his ink-pot, con-

servatism budding in his brain; I see the Incorruptible reconciled."

Paul had no wits to buckler his dignity, but his eyes threatened the tormentor. Elsie helped him out.

"Dearie knows some of the biggest, ugliest words," she interposed, "that were ever invented. And nearly all of them have pretty little stings in their long, long tails. Don't mind him, Mr. Gotch, I believe you're too honest ever to get fat and stupid, which is what Dearie is trying to say without letting you be quite sure he means it."

Her father was obviously disconcerted by this audacious flank attack.

"Do you think," said Paul, charitably transposing the conversation into a different key, "that happiness is necessarily stunting to the finer qualities? I have a theory that it develops them, as sunshine brings out blossom."

"Some deserts enjoy perpetual sunshine," slipped in Patrick Stuart.

The aptness of the retort staggered the initiator of the comparison thus extended. The vicar surveyed him pleasantly; "I am always cautioning you against the pit-falls of the comparative method," he added.

"Grant me an armistice," besought Paul, "I am terribly obtuse this morning. If I had even a modicum of intelligence I should try to develop the thesis that great happiness is more stimulating than nourishing. Properly handled, that ar-

gument ought to knock the bottom out of your satire."

"Great happiness, yes," allowed his opponent; "but the soul of marriage is mediocrity. It is a huge emotional average-adjuster."

"To those who possess the capacity for acute happiness," objected Paul, rousing himself, "an average portion is an ultimate tragedy. And as you evidently see in tragedy the ideal mental stimulus, that ought to satisfy you. But tragedy does certainly not conduce to the laying on of fat."

"At your old trick again," said Patrick Stuart, reprovingly—"tossing with a double-headed shilling. Either way I lose."

"The dishonest coin," Paul told him, "was as dishonestly obtained: I picked your pocket of it."

The verbal fusillade had stirred the blood of both, and Justine's urn was emptied amid a lively continuation of the debate. Breakfast over, Paul fretted aimlessly in the library, while the vicar wrote sundry letters and interviewed a curate. The impatient bridegroom sat down with a book at the edge of the curious oratory that sprang from a truncated corner of the apartment. It held a modest altar, a Bible, a hassock and a crucifix. There were faintly-tinted panel windows—leaden trellis and diamond panes—on each side; the sunshine pierced them dustily.

Paul looked at the slender, carven figure dangling shrunkently from the ebony cross in that grim

death-throe, whose stiff familiarity has so long since blunted its appeal. In his nervous state it smote him newly. The Bible beneath it was gilt-edged and luxurious, boasting an embroidered marker.

The vicar and the curate were chattering, with curt mutual comprehension, of various sick and needy in their cure of souls. Two kindly Christian gentlemen, the bland superficiality of their religious thought ceased to offend the critical onlooker; the oratory and its contents seemed justified by their philanthropy. The old and peaceful atmosphere of the Church, the Church pastoral, the Church consoling, the Church soporific, drew about him. Was he not himself a witness to its omnipresence? had he not chosen it to register his alliance with the woman he loved, to lend that dubitable union a dignified formality in the sight of the world?

Abruptly he noticed that one of the French windows on the same side as the oratory stood ajar. Behind it was the poplar plantation, swaying in the doubtful breeze; beyond and above these plummy saplings rose the vast arch of the Otherwhere, infinitely blue. And in it hung the pallid cobweb of a daylight moon, suggesting, with an edge of serrated shadow, the dread realities of the material universe. He knew something of astronomy; that terrific desolation, so extravagant, yet so concrete, struck him cold. He got

up and walked through the open window into the green enclosure of St. Faith's.

From the low boundary-wall at its southern side he could see along the narrow cinder-path that ran eastward to the cottage in the brick-field. A wisp of filmy smoke was lingering about its chimney-stack. There also breakfast had by now been cooked and eaten; soon Hero would come to him down that same prosaic avenue, "as a bride adorned for her husband." He laughed aloud awkwardly, then blushed to hear his voice in that revealing sound.

Hero had indeed breakfasted, and, dressed in her wedding-garments, sat waiting for Mrs. Gotch. She wore a gray frock with white ribbons and a big and feathered hat of the first-named hue. Her gloves were just being coaxed into their place. The last button fastened, she folded her hands in her lap and abandoned herself to reflection. As the thoughts gathered and grew the moisture gathered and grew in Hero's eyes. Presently the tears were running in good earnest.

Selina Gotch came down-stairs to find her prospective daughter-in-law sobbing pathetically. At the sight Selina's practicality rose in arms.

"My dear Hero," she said, with incisive point, "if you are going to be made miserable by this marriage it shall not take place. I have all along tried to remember that it was not my business, but Paul knows exactly what I think of it."



The fountain of Hero's grief dried up. She put her damp little handkerchief in her pocket.

"I am quite sensible now," she returned, simply, and ignoring Mrs. Gotch's proposition; "I fancy it was with feeling all alone in the world, just for a moment. If you don't mind, please, I'll run and sponge my face."

Selina Gotch signified her approval of this course, and herself took a seat in her son's chair beside the round oak table. A thick manuscript lay in front of her, divided at a particular page by an inserted penstalk. Instinctively she picked up the latter and went on with the familiar task of touching the rough masculine scrawl into legibility. Unexpectedly she relinquished it and began to don her neat brown gloves; she had considered, distastefully, that Hero might also usurp this one of her functions.

The younger woman returned almost jocund; her pride had been whipping her ingenuousness; her cheeks were flushed, her bearing defiant.

"I am ready now," she volunteered, and the two left the cottage, threaded the walk between the daisy-beds, and gained the cinder-path.

Mrs. Gotch advanced with a vigorous and elastic step; despite her years, "her eye was not dimmed nor her natural force abated." Her dour virility contrasted strangely with the tender youth of the drooping girl beside her. Selina Gotch was power in demonstration, her companion, power concealed. One was gray with the gray

of the sword-blade, the other ruddy with the faint rose of smothered embers. Yet, blown into life, the embers might have conquered the steel.

Paul saw the oddly-sorted pair as they progressed towards him. Upon that path he had followed his father's coffin—his father, whose cynical lips had prophesied to his wife the injustices of her son's inevitable amour. It seemed only yesterday, and here she came—the One Woman—mastered by a will his mother had resisted, enforced by a love his mother's devotion had not skilled to win, came to put her hand in his, to plight him her innocent troth, to crown the cup of life with the champagne of self-fulfillment.

He marched into the vicarage and summoned Patrick Stuart.

"If I am to meet my bride at the altar, most amiable hierophant," he told the vicar, "you will have to hurry, for they are coming up the cinder-path, and my mother, I will be bound, is quite ignorant of the ecclesiastical proprieties."

Patrick Stuart laughed good-temperedly and took him across to the vestry. Matins was just over; the officiating curate met them on his way out. The vicar asked him to have the south transept entrance opened and the west door closed for half an hour. As a rule, St. Faith's stood unclosed during the day, year in, year out.

"Got any one to give the bride away?" demanded Patrick Stuart, practically.

"Good heavens, no!" said Paul.

"Better requisition Manners, then," advised the vicar; "he'll do it more artistically than the verger."

The neglectful bridegroom ran after the gaunt young Oxford graduate. That genial person returned with him, and the three proceeded into the nave. Elsie was already there, so was her guardian Justine, the latter according to her wont, reservedly amused. Mrs. Gotch and Hero had that moment reached the incense-laden interior of the church. Seeing them the vicar went to his place, Paul strode to the chancel steps, Mrs. Gotch beat a retreat to a convenient pew, and Hero was left alone.

On the instant her nerves grew tense, her pulses drummed in her ears, her limbs turned to lead. In all the world there seemed but one thing—the figure of Paul Gotch. With difficulty she moved towards it; Patrick Stuart had recourse to his book, and the marriage of Hero Latimer began.

Paul's gaze devoured her expression; it told him little, yet that little stabbed him to the quick. There came again into the face of Hero Latimer that look of blind endurance which had possessed it when first he saw her. Again the tremulous carmine fluttered under the delicate skin, again the young breast rose and fell in those short, piteous sighs, the more piteous for being, as they are, inaudible. He felt as one may feel who holds a small wild bird in his hand and wonders if its

tiny heart will burst beneath the hammer-strokes thumping in his palm. Yet every word of the musical sentences read by Patrick Stuart sounded distinctly in his ears. A thousand high emotions took shape and beauty in his swift brain as it spun them about an image of the sweet, sad womanliness before him. He felt no shame that he had so bound her to him, only a fierce daring and confidence in his power to mold the future into a justification of what he was doing.

As in a dream they went through the time-honored ritual, Paul with a sense of sardonic humor—keen almost to bitterness—lurking in a corner of his spirit. However, tactfully prompted in due season by the vicar, he bent his proud head and knelt, half-ashamed, half-contemptuous, moved somewhat by imaginative sympathy. Hero, on her part, did not falter. She might have been a perfectly-tutored young aristocrat at a marriage of convenience. Paul admired her, secretly.

The numb perceptions of both responded vaguely to the succeeding formalities—the vicar's congratulations, Mrs. Gotch's kiss, Elsie's delighted interest, the signing of the register. Afterwards Paul knew that his mother's eyes had pitied and reproached him, that Patrick Stuart had sighed apprehensively, that Hero's cheek had been very, very cold. But at the moment his head swam: he was to himself, if not to outward appearance, an automaton.

When they drove away in the hired brougham neither spoke. Once their glances met; Hero's limpid, passive, enigmatic; Paul's evasive, even sorrowful. He took her hand in his and held it. So they reached the station.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE CONSENT OF THE CAPTIVE

ABOUT these two, so inexperienced, so diversely strenuous, London closed its great arms, and, like mirrors in a suddenly-peopled room, their souls thronged with contesting life, their own and yet not theirs. Metropolises are the ganglia upon the nerves of history; the thrills of forgotten national emotions linger in them; they are sympathetic one with another. All the capitals of the world are within arm's-length each of each, the provinces are hyperborean.

In some respects this is disadvantageous; it distorts the proportions of society and exaggerates the value of the arts. But it lends itself largely to the perception of types. Hero felt the latter fact, with a species of instant elation; she was not to be classified and she knew it, hence the charm of classifying others; individuality is a notable relish.

Types crowded here on every hand, victualled themselves in her sight, neighbored her at the play, passed her in the corridors of the huge hotel. A new passion, that of observation, sharp-

ened her interest in living. Every 'ocracy grew definite, their skyey sections ceased to overawe her; she ended by contemning Bond Street. All this in a week!

Paul bridled himself vigilantly; her wits peeped out of their seclusion as mice from their holes; sometimes he dared scarcely breathe lest he startle her into self-consciousness and suppression. His delight in her opening personality became acute.

Slowly her renaissance ripened into speech; certain subtle chivalries drugging her fears, she forgot herself; London annihilated her habit of introspection—she became communicative. Paul collected fragments of biography.

Her mother had been possessed by a curious religious fervor. Churchwoman though she had been by birth and training, she had imbibed the extravagant doctrine of the Faith Healers; somewhat of Hero's habitual gravity was thus accounted for. But the excess of spirituality that had warped Frances Latimer's sanity had not controlled her daughter's intellect.

"I used to wish sometimes," said Hero, somberly, "that mother had never seen a church or a Bible. She was very, very kind, and happy, I suppose. But she forced herself to be certain about things no one *can* be certain of, and sometimes when she realized that deep down in herself she wasn't certain, she got so miserable that I hated religion."

"Things no one *can* be certain of!" The

calmly-uttered phrase startled Paul. Its modest yet uncompromising intelligence was doubtless characteristic, but it came oddly from the soft feminine lips. Reticent and uncultured as was his little consort, the glimpse of agnosticism served to show the philosophic bent of her faculties.

Not that there was anything austere in her outlook upon the teeming humanities of the modern Babylon into which she had been tossed. Such trifles as set her aglow with humorous sympathy!—a screeching newsboy with a wild mispronunciation, an unctuously attentive waiter, a caricature combination of hat-brim and monocle, a confidential bus-driver, the size of a constable's inhibitory palm at a crowded crossing—comedy set her quivering in an instant.

Her appreciation of the "lions" was erratic. Ecclesiastical architecture left her cold, the Law Courts fascinated and Westminster disappointed her; her conception of Parliament had been mediæval, the real thing proved dingy. A glimpse of the Terrace interested her, however; she wondered what the waitresses thought of the M.P.'s. The City terrified her—yet not unpleasantly, as it seemed. From the top of a 'bus she studied the countenances of the thronging money-makers.

"How awful it would be to work for these men!" she whispered; "they have cruel faces."

Paul murmured that happily she was not likely to have to. Hero looked at him suddenly.

"If it wasn't for that," she told him, "I shouldn't dare to feel how cruel they are."

Something in the confession warmed her husband's heart.

One day they went to Kew, found their way into the sub-tropical palm-house, and climbed to the gallery that runs round the dome. The house was deserted, the gallery empty even of the childish explorers who form the bulk of its patrons. At an angle they paused, leaned upon the railing, and gazed at the luxuriant greenery. Beneath them was a huge tree-fern—a vast and symmetrical cup of overlapping fronds.

"I came through here often," said Paul, "before I discovered the existence of this gallery. Then for the first time I looked into the heart of that great fern you see below. I wonder if there is any way in which I could command as enlightening a view of yours."

Hero shook her head—it was a pretty head, shapely and fine, large, yet counterfeiting delicacy.

"I am like a sick man by the pool of Bethesda," added her husband, fantastically; "waiting from day to day for the troubling of the waters. Your heart, Hero, is a placid lake; it has depths, but it would not avail me to plumb them now—it could only aggravate my disease. Will the hour ever come when its currents will set towards me, when

its waves will leap my way, when the winds that stir it will blow upon my fever, when I shall leap in and be healed?"

Hero lifted her head and considered this rhapsodic simile; her lips were scarlet and a little pouted, her regard gentle yet perplexed.

"I ask myself sometimes," said Paul, "why Fate should have joined our lives in so ironical a knot—why you should be so much to me, I so little to you."

His wife drew a compassionate breath.

"And yet," added the soliloquist, "as often as I ask myself the question, I am compelled to admit that I would not have had it differently. Whatever Destiny holds in store for you and me, Hero, I can not deny that my wooing has been sweet—is sweet. Since I met you I have had a lingering pain at my heart which has become familiar, even pleasant. If I lost it—though in the shock of some great happiness—I think I should miss it."

Hero's gloved fingers were plucking at a creeper that trailed against the railing.

"I feel," continued Paul, "as if love reciprocated were bound to prove mortal, and as if I, by being defeated, had escaped defeat. Why should one withhold any price which might eke love out to the end of this life, perhaps beyond?"

He also began to pluck at the creeper, speaking covertly to her.

"I love you, Hero, and I shall love you always, whether you learn to love me or not. You may



not easily forgive me for urging you to decide between the precipice and the quagmire—what if I have myself mistaken the roads! When we were married, my mother's eyes pitied us, and some women have the gift of prophecy. I have had horrible dreams, lately, Hero—dreams about you . . . and . . . myself; I have known those shadowy paths where the Future treads on one's heels, pursuing, pursuing, faster and faster, and one leaps into consciousness and the Present, with madness ebbing about one's heart."

She glanced at him, herself vibrating with his bizarre emotion. His eyes were fixed on her.

"You are the only Woman to me, Hero," he said; "a threadbare oath, but sometimes a true one. Think what the Only Flower would be, what the Only Meadow, what the Only Sea-shore, and realize what the Only Woman is to the eyes that have chosen her."

Hero made a little moan—pitiful, protesting. "Oh, I know! I know!" she cried. Then they were silent.

Descending from the gallery they walked in the long vista of greensward which skirts the palm-houses. The goodly panorama was still foreign to the sight of these provincials from the austere North; they felt as if they were manikins in a painting. Groups of domesticity were planted on the edge of copses; here and there a brace of lounging lovers. The rattle of the tea-drinkers came across from the pavilion; they

reached it and shared a pot at one of the small tables.

Hero began to feed an itinerant peacock. The process attracted a tiny child, all lustrous yellow curls, starched laces, and pink sash. The mite came up and stood gravely, her small dimpled hands behind her back. Paul marveled at the exquisite fragility of the little creature, its rose-leaf complexion, stippled with brown, its velvet lashes, its demure, meditative mouth.

His wife put out her hand and coaxed it to her. Together they supplied the ravenous fowl—woman and child lost in their occupation. The dark head and the golden one were close together, both very pure, very delicate, poignantly appealing. A lump rose in the man's throat. The next moment the bird had stalked on, the child had run back to its guardian, and Hero was brushing the crumbs from her gown.

When they left the Gardens, evening and afternoon were, like Shakespeare's night and morning, at odds which was which. A line of brakes was drawn up in the roadway, clamorously soliciting custom. Paul Gotch picked out a couple of box-seats and helped Hero to one of them. Soon they were bowling eastward through the waning day. Paul wished the journey might last forever, so gallantly did the fresh team beat a flying tattoo upon the macadam, so cheerfully the four wheels rasped and swung. A soft shoulder rested against his, a vagrant curl slipped from its pins

to caress his cheek. He could watch at his leisure a proud little nose, and those pale drooping lids, whose expanse of veined white over the full pupils had made memorable his first glance at their owner.

In Picadilly Circus they took a hansom to Frascati's. Hero looked at the swarming streets, the gathering lights, the scurrying night-cabs. Her breast heaved with a sudden excitement; there are moments when London intoxicates. Far off, through a tunnel of black darkness, she seemed to see a swift procession of pictures—a mean street in a Liverpool suburb, a bare work-room in the shopping-quarter, a weary "improver" weeping for a spoiled length of tulle, a lonely grave in a desolate burying-ground. That was once her all. Now she was come indisputably into her kingdom; she had a lover—a passionate, worshiping lover, held in bondage by the invisible cords of her womanhood, and hanging upon her lips for the very breath of life. He had made her existence a thing eager, colorful, rapid, of endless potentiality. All this he had done, and had remained, to the point of desperation, humble. Nevertheless, she estimated him highly, not intent upon depreciating her own feminine prowess. She was a woman; she had become, as every woman may, a queen. Outside, London swirled by her radiant, wide-spreading, ecstatic—she felt herself enthroned, the beggar-maid turned empress.

They dined in a corner of the balcony, not too near the band. Hero enjoyed her meal. Paul reminded her of the first one they had taken together and of the difficult conversation that had preceded it.

"I am afraid you didn't approve of me a bit," he said.

Hero blushed. "I was very hungry," she remarked, apologetically; "I am always cross when I am hungry. Was I awfully impertinent?"

"You were not impertinent at all," her husband protested; "the impertinence was mine. I read your thoughts; the crime and the punishment were one. There is a cruel little story about a Runic ring that gave its possessor the power of seeing thoughts as thin flames about people's heads, and of reading in that manner what was going on in their brains. The ring had a motto—a hideous, truthful motto—this was it: 'An open door, an open heart, a naked sword.'"

His wife crimsoned. "I am sure if you *could* read my thoughts," she told him, "you wouldn't find anything half so terrible."

"How unlucky I am," said Paul; "I didn't mean that at all, though it did seem rather like it, I own. I know you could think nothing—even of me—that was not kindness itself; and that is much more than I have any right to ask."

"Why do you always end with that sort of remark?" she inquired.

"I don't understand," said her husband; "what sort?"

"Those that always sound as though you were making believe to be very humble," Hero told him daringly; "you're not really humble, are you?"

The black eyes flashed. "Not in the least," he replied; "I should have known better than to act in your presence. I beg your pardon; you shall no longer be offended with mock virtues. Perhaps you would prefer savage ones."

"They might become you better," said Hero, jumping blindly at the significance of his repartee; then shrank back, appalled by her own audacity. Paul surveyed her with such utter astonishment that she burst out laughing.

It was the only time that Paul had heard that sound from those sober lips. Smiles had hovered round them, mockery and contempt had thinned and distorted them, but hitherto laughter had not broken forth. The silver chime, a crisp, staccato phrase of merriment, lured him into speech.

"I would crawl ten miles on my hands and knees to hear you laugh like that again," he said, extravagantly.

The idea set Hero off once more.

"I don't think you would look very dignified," she answered, regaining her gravity; "and it would hurt you horribly before you got through with it."



Paul knitted his brows at her.

"I begin to suspect," he vouchsafed, "that I have been shockingly blind; I hardly seem to recognize you in your present mood."

His wife's mouth twitched.

"You *have* been very serious," she admitted; "if only you knew what a relief it is to have had a good laugh."

Paul contemplated the glowing face, so mischievously arch.

"How pretty you are!" he said, leaning across the table. Hero attacked her portion of the dish before them—a mysterious pudding with a name all *n*'s and *e*'s. Yet her blue eyes were very bright.

"Do you know," he observed, "I could go on forever telling you how much I love you."

"I—I didn't interrupt," said Hero, and laughed again at her husband's astonishment.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A QUESTION OF THE ABSOLUTE

THE long train jarred its way into the terminus and halted—after the habit of trains, sickeningly. Mrs. Gotch had come to meet it: she sought for her son among the instantaneous crowd. Finding him, her eyes made a keen inquisition upon his face, harvesting surprise; it was unaffectedly gay. Hero's was hardly less bright, dulled a trifle, maybe, by fatigue, otherwise her transformation was complete. She had on a smart black costume that had not been in her trousseau when she went away; a fashionable toque lent a note of accentuation to her head and shoulders. Her hair was done unusually; Selina Gotch recognized the latest mode. The slender figure was carried with a new ease and independence; at a blow Hero had cut her provincialism adrift. Mrs. Gotch suspected her for it.

Paul caught his mother's eyes and smiled, so ardently happy that she perforce smiled also, rejoicing in his happiness. The women kissed; their better selves throbbed momentarily at the

contact. The man chartered a four-wheeler and gave orders about the luggage. They alighted at the rough wooden gate by St. Faith's and went to the white cottage on foot. Paul walked springily on the familiar path and looked out fondly over the uneven landscape.

"Our ancestral halls are not impressive, are they?" he remarked to his mother; "but our cubic allowance of air is a thing to thank God for."

"I'm afraid Hero will find it very unpleasant on rainy days," said Mrs. Gotch the elder.

"I don't mind that—so much," confessed Hero, with a recrudescence of honesty in the tag of the sentence; "but there are so few people about. The crowds in London were lovely, such queer people, I could have watched them for weeks. If I had to be very miserable I think I should like it to be in London. I am sure I should feel too insignificant to take my troubles very seriously. If I got anything on my conscience here it would grow and grow and grow till I should want to jump into one of those muddy pools."

"I know what you mean," returned her husband; "in London there is no room for one to cast one's private shadow, here it stretches for yards, huge and terrifying, staining one's past or blackening one's future. Egoism is largely an affair of environment; solitude may swell it to a disease, as in melancholia."

In an upper room of the cottage Hero spread

out sundry of her London purchases, yearning for feminine sympathy. Mrs. Gotch accorded it, whimsically but sincerely. Hero scented disapproval of certain merely pretty things. They had procured for her, however, a little gold watch, to which she took no such exception.

"Paul bought so much for me that I insisted he should get something very beautiful for you," said Hero, unconsciously. The next moment she was blushing red-hot from crown to tiptoe—there had been a cruel stab for maternal pride in the suggestion of Paul's negligence and her intervention. But she had sense enough to leave the slip alone; balm, though never so subtly administered, could only gall such a wound.

"Now I will go and draw the tea," said Mrs. Gotch, after due recognition of the gift; "everything else is ready," and she departed.

Hero, left alone, looked out of the window and pondered the harsh browns and greens of the prospect. The pug-mill was thudding monotonously; the sunshine danced on the windy surfaces of the mimic meres; some juvenile anglers, tattered and barefoot, were bobbing for "jack-sharp" in the dusky water.

"If I don't have the dismals before I'm much older," reflected the spectator, candidly, "my name is not Hero Latimer."

Again the swift corporeal blush overspread her; she recollected that her name was indeed not that which she had just uttered. She was a mar-

ried woman, plighted and espoused, and her name was Hero Gotch. She said it to herself, not greatly liking its triplet of syllables. Then, with a philosophic grimace, more humorous than ill-tempered, she descended to the high tea, of which she had caught a glimpse in the small parlor.

That apartment proving empty, she went into Paul's work-room. Her husband was reading letters, and spoke to her casually of their contents. He would have liked her to presume upon scanning them, but she was not sufficiently coquettish. Instead, she considered his library, pleased to find herself mistress of so much print. Paul came and put an arm about her.

"My mind misgives me that you may be lonely here," he said; "if so, let me know before you get too depressed and I will invent diversions. I warn you because I have a bad habit of getting absorbed; it may not hold where you are concerned—you are very dear to me, sweetheart—but it is as well to be on the safe side. I have never been married before, and they say man and wife soon bore one another. What sort of books do you like? Here are novels, a small selection; these are travels, these historical and political, these biographies, letters, and memoirs—the flesh and blood that the historian pickles. London interests you: that rack is stored with London ghosts, scandalous folk, many of them, but immortal for all that, and most with a red scar or

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two over the left breast, where Dan Cupid's arrow went in."

He showed her a corner where was a low rocking-chair, a big screen drawn about it, and a table with a shaded lamp.

"Your shrine," he said; "you admitted that you liked a rocking-chair, so I had one sent up. The corner would be draughty without the screen. And here is a hassock for your feet—a hassock is to a rocking-chair what mustard is to beef. Finally, oh goddess! be propitious to thy worshiper and honor thy shrine not seldom."

"You are very good to me," murmured Hero.

"A selfish goodness," returned Paul; "you have rounded my life into completeness. If I knew a language that only you and I could read, I would write up over your shrine in golden letters a wonderful proverb that certain wiseacres threw out of the Scriptures, 'A friend and companion never meet amiss, but above both is a wife with her husband.'"

He drew her to him and kissed her quiveringly. Mrs. Gotch was summoning them from the next room.

Later in the day the vicar called, bringing Elsie.

"You are complimented, Hero," said Paul "this is Stuart's first visit to these rural haunts my fascinations never lured him hither."

Patrick Stuart was shaking hands with the person addressed; a glance at the faces of both

had brought a pleased, if quizzical, light into his own.

"Take Dearie away, Mr. Gotch, and let me have a share of Hero," instructed the blind girl; "make him understand how your machine eats clay and spits out bricks."

Paul bore off his indolent guest, bribing him with the suggestion of a cigar.

Elsie launched into intimacy. "Now, darling," she cried, "tell me, are you very, very happy?"

"Very," said Hero, putting her guest into a seat; "London is a perfect miracle."

"London be bothered," said Elsie; "do you like being married?"

Mrs. Gotch the younger colored. "It is nice to be free," she owned, "and to go about and to have some one who is very, very fond of you."

"And whom you are very, very fond of?" demanded the persistent psychologist.

"Of course," said Hero.

"Humph," retorted Elsie; "is he a wonderful, beautiful mystery to you?"

Hero hesitated about the penultimate adjective, inclined to agreement upon the noun, but in the end demurred.

"I don't think he's a mystery," she decided; "he is gentle and thoughtful and—and interesting—and unexpected, and so fond of me he quite frightens me sometimes. But I believe I know just how he works."

"And you don't feel as if you wanted to cry out

for joy when you remember that he loves you better than anybody else in the world?" pursued Elsie, incredulously. "You don't feel when you think of him as if you hadn't eaten anything for years and some one had just said 'roast chicken'? You don't feel when you are with him that you are dreaming the most delicious dream of your whole life, and that you are afraid of waking up and finding yourself alone?"

"I believe not," yielded the witness.

"What a pity!" said Elsie. "When you've got it like that, love's the most beautiful feeling you can have. But I don't suppose it's more to you than lots of other nice things that one doesn't rave about. Justine called you *un coeur de glace*, and she told me a story about a princess who lived at the North Pole, and had a heart of ice and a new husband every week. When she kissed them they all died, and she built up their bodies into a tower a thousand feet high, and stood on it every night when the moon came out, singing. And the wind carried her singing away, and new husbands came to her in shiploads; but they all died, too. I made up some of the story myself," added Elsie, with an engaging frankness.

Hero smiled; but the fantastic epilogue was not without its sting. She turned the talk into a less embarrassing channel.

Meanwhile the vicar was felicitating Paul. The two men strolled up and down a flat bank of red clay and trampled loam, Patrick Stuart nurs-

ing his cigar with an appreciative angle of his sensitive mouth.

"Your experiment appears to have been successful," he conceded, *à propos* of nothing; "young Mrs. Gotch seems quite reconciled to your unceremonious incursion into her life."

"I trust so," answered Paul.

"Are you—satisfied yourself?" ventured the vicar, tantalizing his palate by withdrawing and returning the fragrant Muria.

"If a man does not know the whole, how can he distinguish it from a part?" queried the other, mystically.

"Meaning——?" suggested Patrick Stuart.

"That a man can never be sure if he has called forth the absolute love of a woman," interpreted Paul; "or if what he enjoys be as Windermere to the Pacific."

"Can not he?" commented the vicar, dryly.

"He may suspect," allowed his *protégé*; "can he be sure?—temperaments vary."

"Yet each has its own maximum of emotion—what you have called its absolute love," rejoined Patrick Stuart; "so long as a man's absolute of emotion is not below that of his—his inamorata, he can estimate the degree of her love which he evokes by his own degree of contentment."

"If the woman's absolute be lower than the man's?" queried Paul.

The vicar "lipped" his cigar.

"The dissatisfied heart is fickle," he said.

"Indeed," persisted his companion; "I thought it was the satisfied one."

"A commonplace of cynicism," asserted the elder man. The most constant thing on earth is a dissatisfied heart that has hope; but if you are not contented with the absolute of any soul, you must seek a greater absolute in another."

"There are at least three separate and distinct discrepancies in your completed argument," snapped Paul.

"I know," rejoined the logician; "in love contradiction is the essence of sound philosophy. How brazenly yellow those dandelions are! Don't you suppose Elsie will have finished petting your wife?"

At the entrance to the small and daisied garden he threw away his cigar and studied Paul kindly.

"Prosperity to your *affaires de coeur*, my son," he said; "Elsie is to me a memento that I was once, as you are, a yeasty compost of the cultured and the primeval. My life came out of the kneading-trough plain bread—a trifle 'sad,' as housewives have it. Yours may prove cake, in which case, 'may good digestion wait on appetite.' If not, take, as I have done, to tobacco."

He stepped within for Elsie, made his adieux, and went off—fondling, with his mobile lips, a second cigar.

The sunset was flooding the lucid sweep of the west; Paul and Hero stood for a moment to look at it.



"You spoke the other day in London," he said, "of your mother and of her religious fears. Do you remember using the phrase—things no one *can* be certain of?"

"Yes," admitted his wife—her tone had in it an echo of alarm.

Paul motioned to the glowing arc of the horizon.

"That thrills you?" he asked. Her face was answer enough.

"Is it more beautiful or more sad?" pursued her husband.

Hero plunged into herself. "More sad," she replied.

"Why?" Paul drove her back upon rarely-used faculties.

"I think," said his wife, nervously, "because it is so beautiful and lasts such a little while."

"All sovereign beauty saddens," murmured Paul; "either it passes from us or we from it. That sadness is the protest of man against the Finite. There are times when I think it proves him a child of Infinity, at others I feel with you that there are things no one *can* be certain of. Yet if there is to be, at long last, no answer to the imperious desires of the spirit, such as there are to those of the heart and the body, we need not regret having tried to believe it. We shall merely have been greater than the event. Philosophy itself anticipates the fact by hypothesis—

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so science has been made possible. Have you no hypothesis of the Eternal?"

Hero cast down her eyes, abashed. There is a spiritual pudicity, as a physical. The tremor of the sunset answered the fluttering tints about her cheek and throat.

"We can always do right," she responded, obliquely.

"A man's—or a woman's—theory of God is their effective moral compass," insisted Paul; "ethics vary with geography and the date."

The shy thinker, driven to the wall, took refuge in analogy.

"I suppose I'll have to grope *my* way," she said.

The pathetic quip disarmed her husband; he stood thinking for a moment. The air was cooling fast; the voices of the children on the patches of greensward eddied to his ears; the calm pessimism of evening was invading the rugged outlook.

"Theories apart," he confessed, suddenly, "that is what we are all doing—steering by the stars, as it were. And who appoints us our stars?—not ourselves. Love and Ambition, Philosophy and Religion, all have taken their tithe of wreck, all have brought storm-tossed souls into harbor. Not till the ocean of existence shall have been plumbed and charted will star or compass prove infallible."

Mrs. Gotch was lighting the lamps; Paul looked through a pane into his work-room.

"See," he said, "your shrine gleams propitiously; that is my star—to what end does it draw me on? Shall we go in, sweetheart?"

## CHAPTER XV

### PERCEPTION OF THE IRREVOCABLE

THE little house on the brickfield was too modest and well-ordered to narcotize its women-folk with domesticity. Selina Gotch herself found time to read voraciously—for preference a modern type of fiction, massive, problematic, socially-resentful, often grimly humorous. Its iron emotions lent her a kind of countenance.

A certain tact kept her from playing gooseberry; she took her book into the parlor. Her teeth were sound and white; being fond of nuts, she munched them between whiles, like the sailor's wife in *Macbeth*. She was an odd figure, with a blue and red Chinese bowl on her lap, full of whole and broken shells, a pair of crackers elbowing it, a heavy octavo lifted to her eyes; at such moments, in a reluctant, passive way, she was glad of life. Occasionally she traveled afield to some suburb and cronied with odd folk over plenteous tea-tables. Amplitude in her had been frosted by adversity; she had gnarled as a thorn-bush does in mountain winds; she creaked sturdily against all external influences. Hero fath-

omed her cheerfully, too comprehending to be critical.

Hero herself was bourgeoning like a rose-bush in a moist April. She had discovered Dumas—*père*, not *fil*s; Dumas and his brave mock France of the ancient *régime*. Through her illumined brain Gallic romance led its company of ardent puppets—loyal, passionate, gallant, oblivious to the Decalogue, a swirl of rainbow butterflies about the fierce light of love. How could her woman's heart judge them? There was too much of hope and fear, of quick, short happiness with the pang of trepidation in it; above all, too swift a retribution of maimed symmetry and singed wings. Plot and counter-plot flattered her woman's wit that probed them; the inbred qualities of her sex stirred maturely; the elated feminine mind cooed over the warm duplicity, the breathless good fortune, the velvet peccadilloes of these sanguine men and women that ventured themselves so dauntlessly for one efflorescent hour.

At times she disentangled the Frenchman's history with the aid of more ponderous tomes; Paul smiled at her appreciatively, and added intermittent synopses. The demure reader swept aside the fates of kingdoms to follow absorbing he's and she's down the dusty corridors of the past. Moved with the echoes of their murmurous courtship, she was unmindful of the recurrent stigma upon the white brows of the one, the ready



sword at the heel of the other. Were they not human—had they not loved? She peeped at their happiness without a blush.

Her husband took her often to the theater,—thus unawares he could pore upon her face; it grew so bright with sympathy, so glowingly alive to the imagined souls upon the stage. Other eyes rested upon her inquiringly, so magnetic was that pulsating sympathy. Paul could offer her few friends, his circle being masculine and of the smallest; the theater provided opportunities for that dress parade which is disdained by no woman. With her return from London Hero had re-assumed her mourning, but black can be made *distinguée*; he looked for the time when she could adopt gayer attire. Young women are like children—they ail without their share of joyousness, even in fabrics. Unexpressed as it was, each tacitly recognized Selina Gotch's disapproval, both of the extent of Hero's wardrobe and the visits to the play.

Paul's resources, however, swelled to meet both. The foresight of the hard old man who had leased the once unprofitable clayfield was being vindicated by the march of the suburbs; the lack of freight on the Gotch bricks brought an increasing prosperity to the white cottage. The matrimonial spur waged war with the indolence of the man of letters; Paul made new alliances, found himself working different and more remunerative veins of literary ore. His days

filled, even inconveniently; his stimulus was the sight of that screened corner which he had christened Hero's shrine. So the weeks flew.

Paul, tied increasingly to the round-oak table, saw, nevertheless, that Hero took a sufficiency of exercise. At first she beat up quondam girlish acquaintances, but something had come between; she sunned herself in their bewilderment for a while, then, fretted by their childish outlook, let them slip from her. She was all the more lonely.

Yet the instinct of observation that had sprung to life in the London streets saved her from boredom; she walked enjoyably, drank tea, when she grew tired, in convenient *cafés*, and studied the local public as she had studied the metropolitan. She had an excellent memory for faces, and an eye to read them; she marked a dozen amourettes and watched their progress gravely. Her taciturnity increased; it was an effort to speak to her husband of what she had done and seen upon these frequent constitutionals. Sometimes she would describe vivaciously for a few moments, and then, startled by her own act, retreat into herself. Paul humored her, now that she had become his wife; that methodical brutality with which he had marched into her existence, a psychological surgeon with verbal knife and cautery, seemed to have forsaken him. He was tremulously anxious that she should be happy—in her own way at that; he shrank from any appearance of dictation; in the most immaterial of trifles he

urged her to make embarrassing choices. Hero grew placidly self-contained; reading, observation and thought built up her days into personality. Once or twice the theater wearied her.

Summer verged upon autumn; she felt the melancholy of the period; too restless to remain indoors, she walked daily. Setting out upon a golden afternoon, she had gained the high-road that ran into the town, when a quick step roused her to a sense of pursuit. A moment later a voice spoke to her from behind—a ringing, determinate voice, assertive, peculiar.

“Well, this *is* a surprise!” said the voice; “and yet I thought it couldn’t be any one but little Fluffy.” Hero turned. The speaker was a tall, squarely-built fellow, with a blonde mustache and eyes of a golden-brown, notable for their contracted irises. His nose was narrow and slightly aquiline—the Bavarian type—its nostrils caught upwards and outwards. He carried his head with a certain aggressive freedom, the set of his lips seemed a belated part of his expression.

“By Jove,” he added, as she faced him; “if I’d looked again I’d have said it wasn’t you. How smart we are!” And a hand was held out to her—a large, broad hand, with a big buckle ring on it.

Hero gave him her gloved palm.

“Good-afternoon,” she said.

The other was flashing masculine glances about her. There was an involuntary pause.

"And so," pursued her *vis-à-vis*, "you haven't forgotten dear old Douglas and the prom'. Jolly times, weren't they? Been away this year?"

"Yes," said Hero, inwardly amused; "London."

"Keeping you standing, aint I?" she was told; "I believe I'm going your way"—the action was suited to the word; "like London, eh?"

"Very much," answered Hero, quickening her pace to keep up with the regardless strides:

"Big place, isn't it?" dismissed the metropolis from the conversation. "I say, you know it's quite a treat, meeting you like this; I've thought about you a lot. How are the other girls getting on—are you still chummy with the same crowd?"

"I see them sometimes," said Hero, absently. She shied at the idea of proclaiming her marriage—her thoughts were wrestling with methods of hinting it.

"Been to any dances lately?" invaded her ears.

Hero shook her head, perturbed by the question.

"Remember my teaching you how to reverse?" she was asked; "beastly crowd they get there, don't they? I'm off the Island for the future—unless there's any hope of seeing you there next summer; I don't mean to let you give me the slip again. What a quiet little puss you are!—here I've been doing all the gassing and you primming your mouth just as you used to do on the Head when they sang

"'Every pretty girl he kisses  
He says "This is champion, this is;"  
But he doesn't tell his missis  
By the sad sea waves.'

You remember that thing, don't you?—gad, how the fellows used to howl it when they saw a couple spooning!"

Hero was driven into resolution.

"You haven't heard any news about me lately, Mr. Jephson?" she said.

"Still the Mr.!" retorted the person addressed; "no, I've not heard a word of any sort. Began to think I should never see you again."

"Well," burst out Hero, courageously, "I'm married."

Mr. Jephson whistled; then incredulity displaced surprise.

"Rats!" he ejaculated.

Hero colored.

"Mr. Jephson!" she cried.

The other considered her glowing countenance, her stylish frock, her air of independence. His face wrinkled into a look of sly wisdom—libertine, elusively cruel.

"Fluffy," he cried, "you've not been and married some old bounder for his money?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me by that silly name," flamed Hero, on the edge of tears; "I always hated it. I must go now; I've told you the truth, and you needn't have insulted me for it."



The man Jephson descended from mirth to apology.

"I beg your pardon," he said stiffly; "and may I ask your new name?"

"No, don't," besought Hero; "I—I'm sure my husband and you wouldn't get on together: we aren't really friends after all."

"The cantankerous brute," said the man Jephson.

"Oh, I don't mean that," explained Hero; "it's you and I who are not friends. You only met me with some girls I knew. Do let me turn back now; I just came out for a breath of fresh air; I'm not going anywhere in particular."

"Of course, if you wish it," was the grudging reply; "may I not see you part of the way?"

"Please, no," insisted Hero.

The man Jephson held out his hand once more. His flat brown eyes lingered on her like sugary flies on a window-pane.

"I was as pleased as Punch when I saw you a minute ago," he said, "and now I feel as if I wanted to go and get gloriously drunk. I've always hoped to meet you again, you had something about you that got round me somehow: I was certain you'd make a first-rate chum. Your husband's a lucky beggar."

He squeezed her fingers and sighed.

"So you're actually married," he muttered; "pretty frocks and no need to work; by Jove, I'd

have given you the same. Fluffy, I would, indeed."

"Mr. Jephson," murmured Hero, "you didn't mean what you said about getting drunk! Please don't do anything so silly."

The man Jephson looked at her.

"No," he said, "I was only joking. But I'm sorry you've gone and fallen in love without giving me a chance."

They had paused on a corner fairly free from pedestrians; he detained her hand, though she strove to release it.

"Is it love, Fluffy?" he asked her.

Hero dragged her fingers away. "Good-bye," she said, and went off with a hasty step. The man Jephson made a stride after her, but she turned with such an imploring glance that he swung round and moodily retraced the road by which they had come.

Satisfied that she was not pursued, Hero walked more deliberately. Her head, to sensation, was spinning like a top; the last few months seemed blotted out of her memory, even the recollection of her mother's death rolled up like a curtain. She was a girl again, a unit in a class, stamped mysteriously with its mark; in thought she slipped back into the mental gulf from which a strong hand had drawn her.

She remembered that trip to the Island with a bevy of girl friends—rackety, careless, honest for the most part, feminine wildings, shrieking

exultant over their holiday, self-respect and hysteria at hand-grips, self-respect under. Not that she admitted this reflection—she championed them hastily against her incipient censure.

Again she saw the long sea-front, glaringly white, rampart-fronted, curvilinear, backed by stucco hotels, frowned on by broken hills; she saw the Bay swing open to the nearing steamer, saw the lines of boisterous faces on the landings, felt the madness of the townsman's holiday in brain and blood.

What uncouth follies that week had held!—the extravagance of an all-too-brief emancipation bred them daily. But the ozone came back with the memory of them and pleaded their pardon; she had been herself, the self that it came easiest to be. The girls had paired off in the mock flirtations of such maladroit revelers, she had fallen to the lot of the man Jephson—he had elbowed crowds for her, distributed (in joint account with the escorts of her companions) sundry small moneys, lounged with her on the spacious prom', christened her Fluffy—her hair *would* feather over brow and temples—chaffed her good-humoredly and her banterers mercilessly. Once he had stolen a kiss—a half of one!—on the margin of a shadow as they threaded the gawky straddle of the Iron Pier; she had sulked till he left.

She paused, mounting a step. Unconsciously her feet had carried her to a familiar street, to the house where her mother had died. She

chilled horribly, and hurried to clear the grim, low-browed thoroughfare. Passing the residence of the guardian neighbor from whom Paul had delivered her, she bent her head, fearing a chance recognition. At the road-end she entered a 'bus, and was jolted toward the western skirt of the clayfield. Her thoughts overcame her; her mind relapsed into its ancient blank, a sullen, disconsolate calm.

When she went into her husband's room at the white cottage he rose and met her fondly, then darkened. Something had gone from her—something that had enwrapped her since their return from London; the mellowing atmosphere of content; there was a gypsy note in her expression, the taint of fretful rebellion. She challenged his eyes, and her countenance wavered; he ran his fingers through his disordered locks, dismissing his pre-occupation.

"You look tired, sweetheart," he said; "there is a quaint melodrama at the Shakespeare; we will go and see it."

She had sat down in the rocking-chair. Beside it there was an unaccustomed article—an acorn-shaped receptacle of green straw, lined with rosy silk. It stood on a wicker tripod, and the silk neck closed with a puckering ribbon.

"A new ornament for the 'shrine,'" said Paul; "your needle has been so busy lately it suggested a work-basket. See, I put your sewing inside myself."

He parted the throat of the cover to show her; an embroidery needle ran deeply into his hand and he winced. Hero drew it out; a globule of blood appeared on the skin, spreading with surprising speed.

"How deep it went!" she cried, touching the crimson runnel with her handkerchief.

Paul trembled at the contact of her fingers.

"I am a storehouse for proverbs," he told her; "one fits the occasion exactly: 'There is little steel in the needle's point, but there is enough.' An odd saying, is it not?"

## CHAPTER XVI

### AFTERMATH AND GERMINAL

ELSIE took suddenly to spending no small portion of her time at the white cottage. She had been withheld by a characteristic sentiment from incommoding the newly-married couple, but one day struck up a less conventional acquaintance with Mrs. Gotch the elder, and thereupon elected herself one of that person's privileged callers. Selina Gotch's conversation soon slipped round to her favorite literature, heretofore described, and upon Elsie evincing a profound interest, the elder woman read long extracts, judiciously sub-edited in parts. This incident repeated itself; reader and listener held long *pourparlers*, the state of society—that with a small *s*—for subject matter: Hero was a frequent auditor at these debates.

One October day a cold snap sent them into Paul's room, where there was a fire; its wonted tenant, a chilly mortal, was out. Hero sat in her "shrine," Mrs. Gotch on a spacious horse-hair footstool by the hobbed fire-place, Elsie on the couch.



"I like this place," said Elsie; "it feels like Mr. Gotch himself; you expect every minute to hear his voice saying one of those quiet, honest things that make you feel just as cross with him as you're ashamed of yourself. Dearie told him a while back that somebody or other was a prig—somebody that Mr. Gotch knew,—my father can be awfully impudent when he likes. You could just *hear* Mr. Gotch think for a minute, and then he said, 'What we call priggishness is generally the victory of moral courage over good manners.' Dearie coughed, and said 'Time,' and then they both burst out laughing. Dearie is awfully smart at getting himself out of a fix like that."

"I'm afraid it was Paul who wasn't quite polite," put in Hero, a little seriously; she appreciated Patrick Stuart's delicate *aplomb*.

"Now you're only trying to save my feelings about Dearie," commented the blind girl; "but I haven't got any. He's a perfect fraud, and he knows it. Why, I've asked him thousands of questions that he can't answer, and yet he goes on telling everybody how sure they ought to be."

"You mean about religion," said Mrs. Gotch.

"I mean about God," retorted Elsie; "Dearie's a very clever man, but he can't keep his voice from letting out when he's only making believe. It gets a queer little ache in it, like mine when I'm telling Justine an extra big fib. When I was at Blackpool once there was somebody on the sands who used to preach against religion, and

Justine and I used to like to listen. I never heard so much sense-preaching in all my life."

"Elsie!" cried Selina Gotch, half amused, half horrified.

"I don't care," said the heretic, composedly; "it's the truth, but I'll only make you hate me if I go on about Dearie and—and God. I'm sorry the book's ended, and sorriest of all that they didn't get married. Your stories are fearfully interesting, Mrs. Gotch, but they make me feel as if I had a stone in my chest instead of a heart. Now Justine's always make me feel happy when there is a happy ending; as if I were just cuddling down in bed on a winter night and dropping off to sleep thinking of all the nicest things that ever happened to me. When there is a sorrowful ending, still you know that the story was nice while it lasted, and there were some happy times in it. But in your books one gets to hate the happy times, they seem, when you look back on them, to have been so—so silly and babyish."

"People shouldn't do things that won't bear thinking about," answered Selina Gotch.

"Thank goodness, I don't worry about what has happened, or what's going to," snarled Elsie, and apologized immediately. "But I don't, all the same," she asseverated; "the doctors tell me I oughtn't to eat such a lot of goodies, but if I stopped to think about my health I shouldn't eat them, and I should be miserable. What's the

good of being miserable in order to be well, when being well doesn't make one happy?"

"It's better than being happy for a little, only to be all the more miserable at the end of it," retorted the other party to the discussion.

"Is it?" queried Elsie; "now there was Cleopatra; I'm sure her life was worth living. She loved Antony and she ruined him, and he was a great hero; so he must have loved her a good deal to be willing to be ruined by her. But they had a lot of happiness there in that wonderful old Egypt, and when Antony killed himself she killed herself, too. Of course, it was very sad that they couldn't live and be happy always, but they had to die in that way to be as great as they were. Justine says there are no people like them nowadays; that they have all died out."

"And a good thing, too," Mrs. Gotch told her.

"Dear me!" mused the blind girl; "you *are* unsentimental, Mrs. Gotch; I do think it's a pity."

"You see, Elsie," Selina Gotch told her, plying the nut-crackers, "all the sentiment was knocked out of me long ago. Your stories are happy because they mostly stop at the wedding; it's after that that the trouble begins. Sentiment won't stand the matrimonial wash; it needs something more durable."

"But people can't get married unless they love one another," cried the disputant; "you may like people very much, you may admire them very much, you may be ever so much pleased to talk

to them and be with them, but that doesn't make you love them. Now, I admire Mr. Gotch, and all that, but I don't love him; Hero does. If I married Mr. Gotch I should pull all his hair off in a month, and all my liking for him wouldn't save me from doing it."

"I married a man I loved, or thought I loved," said Mrs. Gotch, grimly, "and in six months he deserted me—aye, and his child, too! If I had married an honest man that I could trust and respect, I should have been a happier woman all my days, and *my* hair wouldn't have been snow-white before I was forty."

"You poor, poor thing!" murmured Elsie; "but you must like to think of the time when you were fond of one another."

"Not I," snapped Selina Gotch, severing with her even teeth the brown kernel of a hazel-nut; "I despise myself for having been so easily deceived. If women were the judges of character they are supposed to be, there would be fewer miserable love-marriages. But there, wisdom of all sorts only comes by experience!"

"You are a very strange, queer person, Mrs. Gotch," replied her visitor; "what do you think of it all, Hero?"

The reply was delayed; it came from Mrs. Gotch the elder. "Hero went out of the room a moment ago," she said. . . .

When Elsie returned home—her habit was to come to the cottage escorted by Justine or one of

the vicarage servants, and to make her way back accompanied by Mrs. Gotch or Hero, or even by the little maid Margaret—she found Paul, who was nibbling brown bread and butter and sipping tea with Patrick Stuart. “Bad man!” she observed; “go to your wife.”

Paul sprang up, sending a spatter of the tepid fluid on to the vicar’s Afghan carpet.

“Is anything wrong?” he gasped.

“Oh, dear, no!” said the blind girl, amazed; “I was only poking fun; I’m sorry if I startled you.”

The young man sat down again, relieved. Elsie talked discursively for a while, then went to her den.

“How fond Mr. Gotch is of Hero!” she muttered to herself as she mounted the stairs; “it’s only when you love some one very much that you’re so ready to be anxious about them.”

The talk of the two men had turned upon the blind girl. Paul was remarking her extraordinary perceptions.

“She vibrates to the tones of other personalities,” he said, “as a piano-wire does to the note of a violin. Often she has told, in some inscrutable fashion, when, at one of her daring speeches, I have changed countenance.”

The vicar heaved the profound sigh that the mention of his daughter had the power to draw from him.

“Elsie is my Frankenstein’s monster,” he re-

sponded. "I called her to life, and she haunts me with a double tragedy—that of my past and her present."

Paul did not speak at once—Patrick Stuart's references to Elsie were always enigmatic. At last he said, out of his own thoughts—

"Fatherhood has in it an elusive mystery, less coherent and more empyrean than that of motherhood. You remember it was the sons of God that saw the daughters of men—at least in the mythology of the virile Hebrew. A parable of the real and ideal, is it not? Yet why should we make one male and the other female?"

"Because it chimes with the acutest of human experience," decided the vicar; "in the average the feminine standard tends above the masculine one; but the humanity at the top of the spiritual scale is almost exclusively masculine. And it is when such sons of God see how fair can be the daughters of men that there issue those mental convulsions which leave behind them the wilderness of sex-cynicism. Nineteen-twentieths of femininity is bred and broken in view of the known characteristics of nine-tenths of masculinity. The idealistic male tenth goes seeking the idealistic female twentieth, the unsatisfied fractions in every generation nurse or vent their spleen according to their humor."

"You speak bitterly," protested the listener.

"So shall most men who stake their spiritual all upon a hypothetical greatness in the soul of a



woman," persisted the other; "better risk your life, as duelists have done, upon the turn of a card. Elsie's mother was a silken moth impaled on an ideal—the ideal was mine; in such cases both the thorn and the victim are sentient. Perhaps she was more than a moth; she had the imitative genius which enables the player to reflect a king, as the dewdrop reflects a star. She was an actress—a young Frenchwoman—neurotic, generous, feminine, a finely-touched child, insane with vanity, a typical histrion. The stage was to her the arid, yet tropical, desert in which alone life was possible. Mastered by my love, my passion, my grief, she abandoned it; I exchanged my curacy; she discarded her theatrical pseudonym; we married."

Patrick Stuart paused, trifling with his spoon and saucer.

"I survived the next five years, she did not; there is a tragedy in a quip. Justine—Gabrielle's bosom friend and companion—swore to her to become the protector—from me!—of Elsie, our one child, the ultimate cause of her mother's premature death. To-day, in face and manner, she is the infallible reflection of Gabrielle; her mind has borrowed my passionate bent—for I am passionate, Gotch—and added it to her mother's petulant shrewdness; Justine has made her a creature of the obscurely erotic. Is it not a devil's dance under the shadow of St. Faith's?"

He ended, biting his delicate mustache; then

put down his tea-cup, got out a cigar and lit it; the tobacco reduced the pulsations of the heart, the crimson faded from his forehead.

Paul fingered his chin, lost in thought. "But Elsie is your own flesh and blood," he said doubtfully; "she is a sensitive, high-minded—I had almost said, woman; surely she counts to you for much in spite of her inherited characteristics. You love her?"

The vicar sneered—a smile and a gibe in one. "At odd moments," he answered, "Gabrielle looks into my face out of her sightless eyes, and I do more than love her—I wrestle in an agony of self-contempt that her mother's beauty and affection were not enough for me. At such times Elsie is consoler and avenger. At others she recalls to me the barbaric vanity, the pagan tolerance, the ecstatic luxury, of her mother, and my soul writhes in horror and disgust, as it writhed at Gabrielle's feet. Such women, Gotch, are hell's ambassadors; they fire in us the artist, the evangelist, and the man, and bind our souls in triple cords of compromise. I tell you, Gotch, Elsie is the bewitching copy of my most subtle sins, misshapen, blind, yet beautiful."

His cigar had gone out; he re-lighted it.

"There!" he said, "I have blown off steam: I knew I should own up some day, and surely enough you have found me in the babbling mood. Forget the fact as soon as possible; don't, if you

can help it, anatomize me in that philosophy-box of yours."

"Indeed," confessed Paul, "I was anatomizing myself."

"As how?" asked Patrick Stuart, with the ghost of a smile.

"I was wondering," said his *protégé*, dryly, "however I came to consider myself a judge of character: I owe you many apologies."

"The heart," responded the vicar, breathing out a wide smoke-ring and watching it drift—"the heart knoweth its own bitterness." Again he smiled—a frail yet valiant mirth, and, with a bashful grasp of Paul's palm, said good-night. The emotion softened his face into a poet-like youthfulness.

Outside the vicarage Paul got upon a clanking, jingling tram, and was borne townwards. He did not notice that Hero, unattended, was coming down the cinder path from the cottage.

Reaching the high-road, she turned in the direction of a number of shops, which clustered together somewhat past St. Faith's. As she walked on, some one stepped to her side and stayed there. It was the man Jephson.

"Don't be angry with me," he said, meeting her eyes; "I—I found out where you lived from one of the girls I came across. I've been fooling round for hours on the chance of seeing you."

Hero was thunderstruck; as Mahomet's coffin hung between heaven and earth, so did her char-

acter between the bohemian and the bourgeois—if one fretted her by verging on the stolid, the other terrified her by unmasking the elemental.

"Don't look like that," begged her molester; "I only wanted to say good-bye and ask you to wish me good luck. I'm—I'm off to Africa; the West Coast, Fluffy, about a beastly bridge: I may never see Old England again. I've been thinking about you an awful lot since I met you the other day, you are such a good sort and as pretty as a picture, Fluffy, by Jove you are!—I stole a kiss off you once, it was a rotten thing to do, but I'm dashed if I can be sorry for it."

The woman was recovering her senses. "You musn't talk to me like that, Mr. Jephson," she told him, with a simplicity as stern as it was moving.

"Oh, Fluffy," was the dismal answer; "why did you get married to that Gotch fellow? You see, I've been finding out all about you; they say he's no end of a prig; I'm sure you can't really be happy."

"Please to remember," requested Hero, striding quickly and with head down, "that Mr. Gotch is my husband."

"Worse luck!" retorted the man Jephson. "By gad, Fluffy, what a jolly time you and I could have had together!—you weren't born to be Mrs. Sobersides. I'll bet you've never tasted champagne since you were married."

Paul Gotch's wife stood suddenly still.

"Mr. Jephson," she said, "if you don't want

to make me hate you. go away immediately. How dare you speak to me like that?"

"It's only for once," was the muttered answer; "I had to let you know how I felt,—I've been bursting with it for a fortnight. It all came to me when I left you the other day. You needn't be so hard on me, I dare say I'll soon pop off when I get out to my job—it's near the spot they call the White Man's Grave. You surely don't grudge me a kind word to think of out there, Fluffy. At least say you forgive me."

"Yes," yielded Hero; "only go away."

"Don't you think I should have made you a decent sort of husband?" persisted the other. "I know the ropes a bit, Fluffy, I could have given you some fun."

"Oh, don't, don't!" cried Hero; "good-bye, please."

"You'll shake hands?" urged Mr. Jephson. His request was granted with painful reluctance. Her soft fingers were clutched as in a vice.

"By Jove!" said Mr. Jephson, rapturously; "you are a pretty little woman. Damn Africa! would you like me to come back, Fluffy?—perhaps I shan't croak, after all."

Hero evaded reply and darted into a neighboring shop. She took an unconscionable time to transact a fractional amount of business; when she came out the man Jephson was gone. She went back to the cottage with her head in a whirl. Yet she was vaguely sorry for the man Jephson.



It was on the same evening that Paul Gotch, going into his room, found the lamp aglow in Hero's "shrine," and a ruffle of white cambric thrown upon the rosy lining of her work-basket. He picked it up—a tiny unfinished garment; his eyes shone, he kissed it suddenly; then laughed, both to and at himself.



## CHAPTER XVII

### PHILOSOPHY OF FRUITION

PAUL GOTCH was lounging to and fro across the floor of his work-room, a meditative, softly-perambulating figure. He could not have known it, yet his feet kept the invisible path upon which his father, nearly a year before, had indulged in a similar sentry-go. The dead man's son was thinking of his progenitor as he marched now and again through the shimmering plane of sunshine that fell from the window. Once he sighed heavily.

The sigh had an echo; the echo was a little murmurous sob, the drowsy demurrer of sleep against awakening. Paul Gotch abandoned his species of beat and went to that screened corner which he had christened Hero's "shrine." A new piece of furniture had been added to it—a swinging cot of white wire, with filmy pink draperies. A ruddy spheroid dinted the pillow—the tiny glowing head of a young child. Paul laid a hand on the edge of the machine and moved it gently. The complaining murmur became a coo of contentment and faded into silence. The

watcher, regarding the occupant of the small couch, yielded to an ecstasy of thought.

“‘Every moment dies a man,  
Every moment one is born,’ ”

he quoted, “and yet it is no longer fashionable to ask ‘Whence?’ or ‘Whither?’ still less ‘Why?’ Mysterious atom!—are you all transcendental dust, or do you boast an immortal spirit, imprisoned in an urn of mortality, like Scheherazade’s genie in his leaden box? Was Pythagoras right, or is your soul as youthful as its earthly casket, a very fledgling spirit? Or are you indeed soulless, one more of Nature’s jests, who made the interminable wrappings of the onion to envelope—nothing?”

The slumbering object of this apostrophe fretted in its sleep, poking a midget fist from under the padded counterpane. Paul smiled whimsically.

“You dislike the idea,” he said to it; “so do we all—we even weep over the onion, but we have not invented a core for it, as we have a soul for ourselves.”

He sat down in his wife’s chair and stretched out his legs reflectively.

“Your grandfather lies in Anfield,” he went on; “and who knows if that is the end of him or not? The church-bells chime to him across the flats from Walton and Kirby, Croxteth and Fazakerly, the spires point to the sky, the parsons

preach, the people sing and say 'amen.' What did he think about such things?—the gray, hard, selfish man, whose bowels melted at last over the son of his loins—what will you think of it one day, little life, where still burns a spark of his? To be born, to sleep, to eat, to drink, to beget, and to die; that is all Nature asks of man or beast. And yet we wrap our heads in clouds of our own breathing and say 'We are not as the brutes.' How do we know it?—because we are dissatisfied with Death—well, have not dogs howled on their masters' tombs?"

The soliloquist bent over the cot and pushed the frail red fist with the tip of his finger. The minute digits opened, then closed tightly; the child still slept.

"There," muttered Paul, absorbedly; "I shook hands with him dead, and you clasp mine living—so three generations touch—three men, one that was, one that is, one that shall be. Thus shall sinner slip into saint and saint into sinner. How Cupid sells us love for lives and gambles with his wages!"

He extricated his finger-tip and soothed the protest of the deprived.

"Here," he told himself, "four lives meet, with four million behind them, and all that ever was since time began has made for this. So many wooings, so many matings, so many younglings, and, at the last, the Babe of Babes. How Nature flatters!—the cynical broker."

At this point Hero's rocking-chair lost its tenant, for her husband shook himself into the actual, marched to his table, took a pen and sat down, resolved to abjure any further meditation upon paternity. The day was very fine and bright: he looked at the arch of blue firmament that spanned the brickfield. It was dappled with flying clouds, the sunbeams swept before them in patches of yellow—vivid blots that eddied across the browns and greens of the Gotch estate. The pug-mill thudded unobtrusively, a pale haze flickered about one of the long kilns. Once more Paul Gotch lost himself in reverie.

A footstep roused him after some indefinite lapse; he turned, saw Hero, and smiled. It was at such moments that she glimpsed his inexpressible regard for her. Her face warmed somewhat with an answering surcease of gravity; she paused by the cot, brooding suddenly upon the little flushed cheek and forehead; Paul rose and gained her side. Together they stood passively.

"Isn't it an odd feeling?" asked the man under his breath; "you are no less you nor am I less I, yet that somnolent morsel is both you and I; what sort of a destiny will we work out for it, or it for us? The Chinese worship their ancestors, though they are the only indomitable gods, and the worship of posterity might easier produce more in the way of results. What an inspiration of national and civic rectitude there is in the contemplation of a single youngster!—I would put

up the innocent countenance of a child in every council-chamber and over the altar of every church, yes, on the top of the Speaker's Chair itself. And underneath I should engrave this motto—"Do What is Best for Me." "

Hero peeped at him—a characteristic glance, amused, maternal, a trifle admiring, the least fraction reverent.

"Oh," cried her husband abruptly; "I saw a good name to-day, sweetheart; I found a long list of them in a cyclopædia."

He reached the volume from his table, opened on a paper-marker, and ran his finger down a column.

"Oliver Gotch," he said; "how does that sound?—full, round, dignified. Oliver is not too delicate for the harsh monosyllable which follows it; I think I should like Oliver Gotch; you could put anything before or after it—Oliver Gotch, M.P., Oliver Gotch, Q.C., or Q.C., M.P., or the Rt. Hon. Oliver Gotch, M.P., or even Sir Oliver Gotch. It would sound equally well as Professor Oliver Gotch or Dr. Oliver Gotch, or follow a book-title or even sign a poem, though Gotch is hardly poetical, is it?"

The mother of the hypothetical Oliver was obviously troubled; Paul noticed and interpreted.

"Dearest," he said, "a fig for Oliver; I abandon it from this moment. Let us call him Roland."

The quip failed to reach the target of Hero's comprehension: the disconsolate look grew. She

sought to hide it by stooping over the open pages of the cyclopædia; her husband stroked the brown head.

"Sweetheart," he told her, "choose a name that pleases you and I am pleased. It was your life that was put in pawn for the lad; you shall call him Cholmondeley Majoribanks if you will."

He laid the volume in her lap and stayed watching her. Hero scanned the double columns of small type with a face of indecision. She glanced swiftly from off the page.

"I think I should like to call him Cyril," she said nervously; "wouldn't you?"

Paul considered.

"Cyril Gotch!" he rehearsed the juxtaposition with critical care; "rather ecclesiastical, isn't it? The Rev. Cyril Gotch! He'll be lucky if he escapes taking orders with that name. Yet, on the other hand, it is more poetical than Oliver—'Poems and Ballads, by Cyril Gotch;' it has a quaint flavor, but I don't dislike it. What made you fancy it?"

"It—it just caught my eye," faltered Hero.

"Well," concluded her husband, "since you have taken a liking to it, Cyril he shall be. The name has one advantage: there is no ridiculous diminutive, such as converts James into Jim, or Michael into Mick. Long life and happiness, therefore, to Cyril Gotch; may he inherit his mother's wits and his father's obstinacy, may his



ambitions be worthy, his sins magnanimous, and his love fortunate."

There was a note of abandon in his voice. Since the birth of his firstborn his imagination had been electric; at the slightest increase of tension it began to sparkle like the brush of a dynamo.

"I must really begin to put my philosophies in order, sweetheart," he remarked; "it isn't good to bring children up without a religion of some sort, and they haven't any sympathy with hypotheses. 'Milk for babes,' said my namesake, and was hopelessly wrong when he said it; it's the children that need the strong meat of religion—'Thus and thus was it; thus and thus *is* it, and thus and thus shall it be'—not a real 'if' in the whole catechism."

"I don't think children need to be bothered with religion," objected Hero, unexpectedly courageous.

Paul shook his head.

"There you are wrong, little woman," he answered; "few great men have been bred atheist, though the greatness of many a priest-bred soul has made it turn infidel. But we must learn to believe before we are able to doubt with safety. The child is suckled before it is weaned; it creeps before it can go. We build from the scaffolding of religion the temple of ethics; we win the *ex parte* injunctions of morality with forged affidavits, and there is no trial on this side of the grave."

He gazed at her doubtfully.

"You see I can't keep my head below the clouds," he apologized; "I felt just then as though I had a pen in my hand. Forgive my habit of monologuing; it must bore you horribly."

"Oh, no," said Hero; "I—I like to hear you, only——"

"Only——" repeated her husband with a persuasive inflection.

Hero burst out—there was with her a perpetual choice between volcanic self-revelation and an almost sullen reticence.

"You make me feel so stupid," she cried; "so ignorant, so little and mean; I wouldn't care if I *never* thought of the things that you worry about. And when you make me think about them I hate myself—I'm not fit to have a baby of my own."

She was driven upon a gentle weeping by the recoil of her own emotion.

Paul bent over her, moved with her vague affliction.

"There needs no more scathing indictment of my philosophies," he protested, "than that they make you shed tears; I am always terrifying you with my scarecrow thoughts, standing between you and the sunshine, as I do now. I am a great fool—Life, while it is life, should think only of itself: 'It is a comely fashion to be glad.' Do you know, dearest, I am half in mind, like Faustus, to burn my books—in a modern equivalent, to forswear the Baconian method. Would it

make you any happier if, like Banquo's, there was no speculation in these eyes that I do glare with?"

"You—you needn't sneer at me," Hero had to say.

"God forbid," said her husband, alarmed; "I was sneering at myself, who can not be contented with all that should make a man happy, but must needs send my wits wandering over the edge of the world."

He took the drooped hands into his own and caressed them.

"How you must despise me!" got out his wife; "you'd have been much happier if you'd married some one who was really clever and serious."

"I did," said Paul, banteringly; "you are so serious you don't smile more than once a month, and so clever you can pick the kernel of a thought before I have half expressed it. Your successor, sweetheart, shall be a fool of the first water. And now a truce to gloomy fancies and arguments; you shall go out this evening, baby or no baby. Where is the paper, while we see what is on?"

He drifted from the room in search of it.

Hero dried her eyes and scolded herself assiduously. The ruddy little head drew her attention, and her mouth softened. The mother in her stirred, and her expression changed; she drew a lingering breath.

"He is like Paul now," she reflected—"now his eyes are shut. But when he opens them he

will be like me." She knelt at the side of the cot. "Poor baby," she said, "your father will love you more than I shall; sometimes when I look at you I am ashamed—you have no right to be, really—you are a soft little, warm little lie, baby dear, and your father believes you. Oh, I wish I were fonder of him, fonder of you!"

Paul came back with Mrs. Gotch the elder.

"I have been telling Cyril's grandmamma that he is Cyril," he said, "and I am afraid that she will require reconciling to the fact."

"Not at all," retorted Mrs. Gotch; "but Paul asked my opinion, and I admitted that I thought he might have chosen something more manly and less like the name of a character in a novel-ette."

"Paul can call him what he likes," flashed Hero, from the depths of her rocking-chair.

"Excepting his famous namesake, the Alexandrian, I have nothing against Cyril," laughed the authority; "Hero likes Cyril, and it is her baby, so Cyril it shall be. I feel now as if to re-christen him would be to destroy his infant individuality. No, St. Peter shall open him an account in the Big Book under the name of Cyril; may the balance prove on the credit side."

Neither of the women caring to pursue the subject, the decision became absolute without more ado.

Despite her objection to his "unmanly" cognomen, Mrs. Gotch was more than willing to take

sole charge of her grandson, and Hero enjoyed her evening at the play with all the vivacity of disuse. Her husband put an arm about her as they drove home.

"I have just discovered that I am jealous of Cyril," he said.

Hero started.

"Why?" she demanded.

"He has been engrossing too much of your attention," explained Cyril's father; "I feel that this evening's frivolity has taught me how much of the spiritual law, as represented by our two youthful hearts, has been sacrificed to the natural world as represented by Master Cyril."

Hero was relieved by this piece of exegesis—she would scarcely own to herself the fact or its explanation.

Arrived at the cottage, she went into the work-room to warm herself. An envelope stood on the mantelpiece—an envelope with a foreign stamp and postmarks; she opened it casually. It was on thin glazed paper, and read—

"DEAR MRS. GOTCH,—Africa has not yet done for me, as you see by this. Indeed, I hope soon to be in England again, and to renew some old acquaintanceships.

Truly yours,

CYRIL JEPHSON."

Hero stood gazing at these simple lines—fascinated by their coolness and skilful superficiality.

Paul came in from hanging up his coat ; his wife's eyes glanced from him to the missive ; suddenly she realized the betrayal in the Christian name of the signature.

"A letter, sweetheart," her husband said ; "what news?"

Hero crumpled the epistle and threw it into the fire ; Paul lifted his eyebrows inquiringly.

"It's from some one who should not have written to me," answered his wife, quiveringly ; "some one I forbade even to speak to me. Please don't ask me anything more about it."

"I wont," said her husband, lightly ; "aren't you ready for supper, sweetheart? The mater says that Master Cyril has slept like a top."

Hero winced at the last sentence and looked at the fire-grate. The final ashes of the consumed sheet were just flickering into sable.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### NATURE AND CERTAIN VACUA

THE child Cyril waxed imperceptibly, as children do. Asleep, Hero had remarked, he bore a marvelous resemblance to Paul : there was something absurdly man-like in the full forehead, the deep upper lip, the stamp of inert power upon the soft cheeks and dimpled nose. But when the large white lids swung up from the baby eyes there looked out the lucent blue orbs of Hero herself, as strangely characteristic and mature as the imagined cast of thought that had lingered about the sleeping face.

The contemplation of this innocent duality fed in Hero an unusual imaginativeness. She began to weave allegories of self-pity about the little creature ; that blended personality seemed a wrong done to herself, the soul that looked out through those azure windows was part of her soul, a portion of her spirit rent from her and prisoned in a flesh that was not her own flesh. Quietly as the currents of life flowed about her, she herself was a whirlpool of thought and emotion ; she had ailed somewhat after the child's birth ; pathology

could have mapped her present mood on paper with all the cogency of a self-satisfied materialism; her odd regard for the child was symptomatic in the extreme. The tiny countenance, so amorphously like her husband's, begot in her a kind of resentment; imperiously, arrogantly, it thrust upon her its continual necessities. Yet she pitied it for its eyes.

She had called it Cyril, a transient folly, that meant, even to herself, rather less than half of nothing. A sudden *rapprochement* between the printed name and a tolerant memory had set her tongue in motion; once she blamed her husband for his ready acquiescence; truly she would have thanked him for some fraction of that masterfulness he had been wont to use. In any case, having suggested the luckless cognomen, she dared not show him the man Jephson's letter. It is in her flip-pant humors that Fate is most dangerous; her jests undermine kingdoms.

The child was to Paul a primeval compliment, the last link in the circle of masculinity; to Hero it was the final fetter upon her vanquished individuality; to Mrs. Gotch it was a nursling and an occupation; to Elsie Stuart it was the key of essential womanhood. When it was laid in her arms she vibrated with a new passion, she glowed with the tremulous ardor of a Madonna. The doors of her heart opened for it, and a host of eager impulses surrounded it with extravagant attentions. She sang to it, laughed to it,

romanced to it, cooed over it—softly as Cytherea's doves—she was the purest of Cythereas, rapt by the most innocent of Adons. Once the child, entrusted, sleeping, to Elsie, woke and wept assiduously; Hero took it to her and stilled its hungry acclamation with some hasty nourishment. The blind girl heard the determined piping die into a flattered sigh; a paroxysm of unconscious envy gripped her, her viewless eyes widened, her mouth parted, her cheeks flushed. The ministering mother glanced up and saw it; bitterness came into her mouth; she knew of what she had been robbed.

Elsie was interested in the details of the infantile existence; her inquiries elucidated a lack of reciprocal warmth on Hero's side. Mrs. Gotch, who had joined them at the sound of the child's weeping, protected her daughter-in-law. They had never exchanged a word beyond the comparatively superficial, these two, yet they understood. If to understand be not quite to forgive, as has been argued, it is at least to pity.

"Babies are a great nuisance, when all is said and done," put in the elder woman; "and what is far worse, a great responsibility."

The blind girl sniffed, disparaging the defense.

"If I were Hero," she returned, "I should like to have one baby for a while, just so that I could enjoy the very, very own feel of it, and then I would like to have a hundred."

"Elsie!" cried Mrs. Gotch, incredulous.

"I would," persisted the other; "and I would have a big warm house for them, with soft carpets and nice cushions, and I would play games with them from morning to night, and I would go to sleep with all of them cuddled down beside me."

"Indeed," said Selina Gotch, with grim humor; "and who would find bread-and-butter for this infant school of yours?"

"Their father," returned Elsie joyously—romancing was always ecstatic with her; "and he would be a wonderful, beautiful mystery."

"He would if he kept that crowd in boots," interpolated Mrs. Gotch.

"And when he came home at night," said Elsie regardlessly, "we would all sit round till he had finished his dinner, and then he would play games, too, and sing to them. And when the children were tired we would put them to bed and sit by the fire ourselves, thinking what we would do with the babies when they were grown up. Oh, it would be lovely!"

"Would it?" said the experienced one; "I should like to see you try it for a week," and with this observation she went back to the kitchen. Elsie fumbled for Hero's chair and sat down on a neighboring footstool.

"Aren't you a happy girl?" she murmured.

"I suppose so," said Hero, smoothing the little gown into order.

"If that were my baby," pursued the romancist,

"I should only be afraid of one thing—squeezing it to death out of love. I feel as though I had just come to a fine dinner where every one had filled themselves up and were just drinking coffee and saying how grand it had been, and as if no one asked me to sit down or said they were sorry I was late, but all the while I had a horrible feeling of emptiness. You are lucky, Hero."

"Oh, don't, don't!" begged Hero, and choked on the remainder of the adjuration.

Elsie heard a gasp. "What is the matter?" she cried; "I didn't really want you to sympathize."

Hero caught at the pretext. "You poor dear," she asked, in a pause between silent sobs; "would you really like to be me?"

"Well, no," answered Elsie, honestly; "not you, but I should like to be you if I were I and Mr. Gotch were somebody else. Then, of course, the baby would be my own. But I'm not lucky as you are, I have to be content with loving a mystery."

"That sounds very unsatisfying," said Hero; she knew sufficient of Elsie's romance to be cautious.

"You musn't be told any more," warned Elsie; "I gave a solemn promise. I've tried to break it already, but never again! I felt as mean as mean could be."

"What a strange girl you are!" murmured the other, evasively.

"Never mind," said Patrick Stuart's daughter; "it's all over, my knight went away; I set him free and he went away forever. I heard him cry as Dearie did once when I vexed him awfully. And that night I cried pints myself, and the next, and the next, but the days went and went and I stopped crying. You won't ask me any more, will you?"

"No," responded Hero, and kissed her pathetically.

"Lend me your baby to hold," commanded Elsie, with stern self-constraint; "give it me quick or I shall burst out crying now."

The warm little bundle was laid in her offered arms; she rocked it instinctively, crooning to it in the fashion of all mothers.

"Elsie," broke out Hero, watching her, "tell me, what do you think makes us love a person?"

"Nothing makes us," decided Elsie, sapiently; "we just do it. It's fearfully bad for us sometimes, but we do it, all the same. There's a sorrowful song about it, where the girl says—

"'Waes me for the time, Willie,  
That our first tryst was set;'

and

"'Waes me for the destinie  
That gart me luvè thee sae.'

It's a funny language, but I've had it all explained to me—it means just what I told you;



it was a bad thing for her that ever they met, but she couldn't help it, she had to love him in spite of it. And I guessed, somehow, he wasn't a good man."

"Was he good to her?" asked Hero, tentatively.

"I'm afraid not," said the commentator; "it was a queer song, and I only remember bits of it, but she was dying because of something he had done to her. But she only asked him not to forget her, and she didn't even have to tell him she forgave him; she just hoped he'd be happy, and said she'd never loved any one but him."

"I think she was a little fool," declared Hero, with a reversion to the practical.

"Exactly," assented Elsie, cuddling the baby; "every one is who is in love. Justine says it is the most beautiful foolishness in the whole world, and when you've got it you quite pity the wise folks."

"I wouldn't go on loving any one who was cruel to me," insisted Hero; "if they were cruel they couldn't love me, and I should despise myself if I could go on loving any one who didn't love me."

"You couldn't help yourself," rejoined the blind girl; "you would just go on hoping and hoping that his heart would come back to you. Sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it does; I know lots of stories about cases like that, and some of them are so sad they would make you cry on

your birthday. But they are all beautiful, because the people loved one another once and were just madly happy for a while."

"I don't see how a thing can be beautiful when it's as dismal as it can be," complained the critic.

"Everybody has got to be dismal some time or other," said Elsie, philosophically; "it's all according to your fate, the thing is that you *have* been happy. Dying's like going to sleep with the toothache, only you don't waken up again; but it's not so bad if you can remember some really nice times when you hadn't the toothache."

After all, there was something of the Ironside in the listener; she revolted somberly against Elsie's paganism. Yet she saw no choice between it and reprobation of her own discontent. The sullenly-indomitable in her character demurred to the carnal self-surrender which she diagnosed in the blind girl's attitude towards the grand passion. Hero herself was in no mood to abandon her personal quarrel with Destiny for the discussion of the abstract: like Maeterlinck's obsessed heroine, *she* was not happy. All else paled into irrelevance.

As often, however, as she intruded into that sub-conscious debate which her obscurer faculties carried on in continuation of her talk with Elsie, her sentimentality, instead of groping in the future for some desired object, reverted to the man Cyril Jephson. He was the only male upon whom, by chance or inclination, her halting fancy

had dwelt even for a little. He was unexacting, boisterous, loudly cheerful; she topped him mentally with ease, yet felt herself abashed by his sanguine humanity. His eyes had appreciated her without infusing that homage which is too supernal not to be embarrassing.

By degrees she came to trifle wittingly with her recollection of him; re-reading "Marguerite de Valois" she slid her personality into the skin of the Duchess de Nevers, discarding that of the Queen of Navarre—the red-headed Coconnas had more in him of the man Jephson than had the gentle La Mole. Other changes took place in her sympathies; the presence of that now sedulous recollection was as iron secreted near a compass, which, in deranging the needle, deranges much else.

Had a wanton fate not prompted her to propose Cyril as the name of Paul Gotch's firstborn, even had that signed note with its veiled promise—half threat, half entreaty—not followed; had Elsie not preached Kismet, Hero might still have trailed through the corridors of romance in Queen Margot's ruff and train, still rescued La Mole, with just a gleam of Paul Gotch in his handsome eyes, from the drawn sword of the pursuing Coconnas. As it was, Coconnas carried his red *chevelure* with the braggart air of Cyril Jephson, and Hero regarded him with the tolerant glance of Henriette de Nevers. So largely does the mind of the reader bulk in every tale!

She spent long hours in her "shrine," dram-drinking with fiction for intoxicant; the child slept much, the cot stood at her elbow. Paul would peep at her across his table; he worked quickly and well, his pulses even and strong. Occasionally he paced the floor for exercise, sometimes with Cyril in his arms; he bantered himself for a dry-nurse, but liked it, nevertheless. Ambition in him took a new form; he plotted a career for his infant son. His best friend could not have called him a romantic figure as he strode up and down, a gaunt being in a loose frock-coat, the child's draperies dangling across the black skirt of the garment. Hero laughed at him; disrespectfully, though, he should have seen.

He ended by misdoubting her indolent calm. "Are you happy, sweetheart?" he would ask, pausing by her chair. "Of course," she would answer, with a smile.

"I wish I knew more of what went on inside that pretty head," he confessed once; "reticence comes natural to you, does it not? That is what I tell myself, and yet I wish we talked more together: I tried, till I realized that our conversation meant my monologue." He laughed nervously.

"I'm sorry I don't please you," countered Hero. Paul flushed deeply.

"There can be no question of your not pleasing me," he responded, "as long as you are well and at peace, but I have wondered lately if your life

were not a fraction too hum-drum. Would you like to travel for a while?—we could afford it.”

He went on his knee to look at her.

Hero stirred, then relaxed.

“There is Baby,” she said; “you can not carry a child about at that age.”

Her husband’s face drew into a spasm of regret.

“Darling,” he whispered pleadingly, “you—you don’t grudge him to me?” The protest was oblique, yet it touched Hero. She put her hand on Paul’s shoulder; their gaze met, her eyes swimming with sudden feeling.

“I—I didn’t mean it,” stammered her husband, with quick, masculine penitence.

Hero pardoned him confusedly—asking herself many things.

## CHAPTER XIX

### UNMASKING THE ELEMENTAL

PAUL GOTCH stepped out of the white cottage and walked leisurely towards the St. Faith's side of the brickfield. August was come again with the glowing skies, the hot, indolent breezes, the drowsy shimmer of her splendid noons. Twelve months of thought and feeling annihilated themselves, the exquisite regret of pleasurable memory vibrated into being; once more he was wooing his bride—a bride and no wife. The fretful roar of London drummed in his remembering ears, the mysteriously-recollected scent of a pink tropical flower in one of the hot-houses at Kew fluttered his breathing, it changed to the dry, harassing odor of Russia leather—a woman in black lace had worn the curious semi-perfume at a Haymarket matinée, in the next stall to theirs. In flash after flash each sense dipped into the storehouse of past feeling, electrified by the indubitable thrill of high summer. The soul of the man emerged tremulous, an old pang echoing at his heart: his lips shaped silently the name of his wife—endearing adjectives clustering about it.



As he crossed the cinder-path Paul Gotch became aware of a fellow that lay, chest downwards, on a green knoll commanding the white cottage—a fellow in a smart tweed suit and bowler hat. He was ostensibly lost in contemplation of a penny illustrated journal. As the observer flanked the observed, he saw that the publication was one of those debauched prints begotten by the camera upon the press, and whose pages, at the moment, Libidina divided with Mars. Paul Gotch sneered, expressing a silent ferocity of protest; the loungee looked up in time to catch the sneer. In another moment the long limbs of the former had carried him past the spot.

The other waited till his critic was out of sight, then rose, and, pocketing his paper, advanced towards the small house from which Paul had just made his exit. At the door he knocked deliberately; the little maid Margaret answered it.

"Is Mrs. Gotch in?" he asked.

"Young Mrs. Gotch is," said Margaret; "the master's mother is in town."

"That will do," she was informed; "tell young Mrs. Gotch that a friend wishes to see her." And the speaker stepped into the Lilliputian hall.

"Yes, sir;" returned Margaret; "what name shall I say?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter about the name," was the reply; "say it's a gentleman from Africa."

"Very well, sir;" answered the little maid, and showed him into the drawing-room.

The visitor took a seat and lolled therein for an instant, then made a tour of the apartment, peered at a book or two, glanced out of the window and shrugged his shoulders.

"Beastly dull hole," he decided; "bet Fluffy's been bored to death."

He listened intently; a door opened and closed not far off, a step sounded without, and slowly, reluctantly—a figure of anxiety and terror—Hero entered.

They looked at each other in silence—a second's interval that seemed to embrace æonian vastnesses; Hero was trembling. At length she said, fighting for a simple sternness—

"You should not have written to me, Mr. Jephson; you should not have come to see me."

"Dash it all!" objected Mr. Jephson; "you musn't take it like that, Fluffy; one would think I weren't to be trusted. Can't I call to see a friend just because she gets married?"

Hero's eyes reproached him; he knew that she shrank from referring to the nature of their last meeting.

"I've had an awful time of it in Africa," volunteered her uninvited guest, sitting down; "fever twice, bitten by half-a-dozen snakes, and got nearly killed in a row with a nigger. But I pulled through everything because I wanted to see you again; I can't make it out, the hold you've got over me, Fluffy."

"Mr. Jephson," said the person so addressed,

with pale, pathetic lips; "if you call me that again I must ring for Margaret and ask her to show you out."

Cyril Jephson stared, then laughed.

"You *are* a plucky little woman," he responded; "well, I'll swear off, though it is a pretty name and fitted you down to the ground once. You've changed a lot, though, by Jove!—I don't wonder, living in this hole. I've just had a week in Paris and another in London; I was run down horribly and needed bracing up—I was wishing all the time you'd been with me; gad, but you wouldn't know yourself when you'd had a few days with me! But there, I suppose I'm not to think of what might have been."

"You must go now, please," said Hero. Her blue eyes were like stars, her cheeks had begun to burn, her mouth set in a determined line. But in her soft cheeks there were unmistakable hollows, to betray the strain she was putting upon herself.

"Don't say that," besought Cyril Jephson, whetted to desperation by this firm front; "have some mercy on a fellow. You don't know how I've thought about you in that infernal swamp. I used to dream about the Isle of Man and the fun we had there. Remember our boat being caught in the current round Douglas Head, and how I swore at the johnnies that tried to help us, and would get her out myself because I couldn't bear to look a fool before you?"

Hero drooped; the picture came back to her: as pictures will come back—flung upon the canvas of the mind beyond the power of words to copy. The sheer black crags, velveteed skyward from their verge with motley greens and loamy yellow, dotted with grouped pleasure-seekers, and crowned by a castellated clump of brick and mortar; the dove-gray piers and breakwater, the driving spray, the swirling undertow, the shouting boatmen in the nearing gig, the fierce torso on the central thwart of the four-oar—hat gone, coat off, muscles starting, face scarlet with energy and passion—a Coconnas of the nineteenth century. For an instant only recurrent admiration overcame her; she passed from it into calm.

“You forget that I am married, Mr. Jephson,” she said, coasting dangerously near argument.

“Do I?” retorted the accused; “I wish I did. When I think of your husband I could wring his neck. He can’t appreciate you; I’ve met the sort. I’d have given you your fling—lord! a man can’t knock about the world as I’ve done without knowing something of women. I tell you, a woman wants her fling, and, by gad, if she’s one of the right sort she’s bound to have it.”

“I can’t stay any longer,” said Hero, distressfully; “I have a friend here.”

“Dash it! I’ll bet I’m the older friend of the two,” cried Cyril Jephson; “you’ll let me be a friend still, won’t you?”

"No, no," begged Hero; "please go away and don't come any more—ever."

Denial is the throttle of emotion—when it is absolute it raises the pressure alarmingly; the human engine has no competent safety-valve. Cyril Jephson became avid—he fell on his knees; both, which was a mistake. Paul Gotch, with more courtly instincts, had pleaded his cause upon one. The latter attitude has fewer contacts with the humorous.

"Don't send me away altogether," urged the suppliant; "I can't give you up like that, Fluffy, I can't; you're the one woman I really want; it's awful to think I must let him have you, you know."

"Oh, what am I to do?" cried Hero, meaning that when an able-bodied man will not accept his dismissal it is extremely difficult to get rid of him.

"Say you're the least little bit fond of me," suggested her suitor coaxingly. His face was glowing, his eyes devoured her, his mustache bristled over his powerful teeth.

"Certainly not," was the immediate decision.

Cyril Jephson would have spoken, but Hero motioned him into silence, enforced by a whispered "Hush!" There was a halting step in the passage; it came to the threshold. A moment's fumbling and the door swung inward. Elsie Stuart entered, carrying the child in her arms. The petitioner had gained his feet; a glance

showed him the newcomer was sightless: he remained mute.

"Excuse me, dear," said Elsie, "but they've sent for me from home, and Margaret is busy with lunch. May I give Baby to his mother?"

"Of course," answered Hero, blushing furiously, and accepted the small burden. The blind girl had on her hat, she made for the door; from that point she returned, disengaging something from her pocket.

"Here is Cyril's rattle," she observed: "I am always marching it off with me."

"Thank you, dear," murmured Hero, freezing horribly, and Elsie completed her departure.

The man Jephson was tucking a perspicacious smile into the corners of his mouth. The other saw it and struck out desperately.

"Mr. Jephson," she whispered—a clear, sibilant threat, like the voice of a sword-edge in the air—"go, or I shall hate you."

"Then good-bye," she was told, genially; "but not—not for the last time, eh?" A stride or two and the outer door closed softly. From the window Cyril Jephson peered in. Hero was sitting, a figure of stone, the child slumbering on her lap. . . .

So far as her superficial consciousness was concerned, Hero's mind remained, for some while thereafter, a more or less perfect blank. But there fell occasionally upon that raised tablet the shadows of a vague and mysterious cerebration.



The shadows themselves were no less vague than fearful. "Not for the last time," the man Jephson had said to her. An inference from the child's name and her apprehensive tremor had tempted him to indulge in that ominous prophecy. His discernment made her angry, yet warned her that his mood had become dangerous—what the word meant she knew without thinking—it had adumbrated ignominy. Elsie's paganism called to her wandering mind; she fled from it, shivering. For her the springs of action were in herself; drawn skyward, she hugged the earth; dragged earthward, she fought to fly. Nor had the last year passed over her fruitlessly. Something new asserted itself in her, a power of inchoate ethical criticism; she protected Cyril Jephson from it, however, and feared herself for doing so as much as she feared him for needing it.

One thing she permitted herself actively to cognize; she could not be said, in any feminine sense of the word, to love her husband. The tears welled up into her throat; she pitied him whole-heartedly at the admission; an orgasm of womanly compassion shook her into a sob, she blamed herself for her inability to warm to him; yet the maternal in her regard for him lingered upon her palate like a taint. Once she had almost loved him—unwonted comfort, exaltation, the pride of empire, had effervesced into a beady froth imitating the piled white foam of passion.

Her thoughts came back to the child in her

lap—it was more like Paul than ever: her part in it seemed suppressed, hidden, a thing unhallowed—her body had been tithed by Lucina; not so her mind, the child left her cold. Paul, on the other hand, felt his pulses beat back upon his own arteries. Nevertheless, Hero remembered his question, and knew that, in very truth, she did not grudge him this reflex of himself. But she herself was indifferent, as the mirror may well be. Her unwitting cynicism was profound.

When next she looked down at the child it had awakened, and the serene blue of its delicate orbs was answering to her own. She recognized the fraction of herself and sighed. Yet she felt that she did not grudge that, either; she had taken deeply the imprint of Paul Gotch's character—a certain breath of gentle comprehension was the result; at times she flattered herself with his ecstatic passion for her. Oddly enough, she did not regret her tribute to that passion: something in her had smitten him with a kind of madness, the fault was not his; she had liked him for his uniqueness, pitied him for his ill-starred attachment, beguiled him with a counterfeit, and sometime self-deceiving love, and paid his devotion with—a life. A quaint idea stole upon her that so she had earned her manumission.

The return of Mrs. Gotch and the belated service of lunch broke in upon her confused meditation; afterwards she complained of a headache and went to lie down, giving the child into the

elder woman's care. Selina retired to Paul's work-room and perched herself in the sunshine of the window-bay, dancing her little grandson and chattering to him absurdly. Her theories exhausted themselves upon matrimony; childhood touched in her a vein of irresponsible naturalism.

Paul arriving in due course, heard of Hero's indisposition, and came up-stairs to draw the blinds and prescribe a wet bandage. The physician lapsing in the lover, he stayed to whisper and condole. His hands were cool and firm; they affected the dissembling Hero extravagantly. She pretended to sleep; at last he went away with elaborate caution.

Wearied by her excitement and the fatigue of complex thought, Hero fell asleep in earnest. Nor did she wake until it was verging upon dusk. She rose, put her hair in order, and descended, hungry and cramped. Paul's room was empty, her "shrine" dark. She passed to the parlor across the narrow hall. The door was not latched; she pushed it and entered. The table was laid for dinner, the lamps lighted. In a big chair sat Mrs. Gotch, the child on her lap; it was crooning and kicking. Paul leaned over it, interested and amused.

Hero seemed to be peeping at them from a great distance—something told her that if it were so they would be no less absorbed and happy.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE GORDIAN KNOT

A DAY or two passed; the normal re-asserted itself. Hero slept and worked, ate and drank, nursed and read. Her tendency to inertia overpowered her unrest. A sequel of the recent strain abode with her; half of her mentality seemed asleep; her mind enjoyed a dull peace, such as a fatalist might borrow from his cynical creed. She lounged in her rocking-chair, a book in her lap; the gentle stimulus of the tea-cup came welcomely to her drowsy brain, the sunshine yellowed the afternoons—half-comforting, half-narcotizing her. Sometimes she dozed.

Paul felt the heavy dubiety of her mood; he studied her face in one of her occasional trances. The woman, he saw, had dominated the girl, slumber accentuated the broad lines of the brow and chin, the white, veined eyelids lent the grave countenance an air of the largely classic. The mouth, slightly parted, was incongruously childish, retaining the incipient sob which he associated with his first observation of her; it drew him as a magnet draws steel. Every fiber

of his being craved that mysterious contact that we call a kiss. The lips were full and red, curved appealingly, the upper trembled in a ripe suspense, like a drooped and dewy cherry.

Her hair, dragged somewhat downward by her position, fell over her temples and ears; the little pink lobes of the latter swelling from under the impromptu *bandeaux*; she had taken the brooch out of her high collar, her throat quivered to the long sighs of her breathing. Behind her head was a big cushion with a cover of silk and velvet patchwork; some vivid tones stared her cheeks into the most delicate modulation of that magical nondescript, flesh-tint.

Paul felt that there brooded about her a sense of self-contained beauty that excluded him like an abyss. Her almost petulant calm—the admission of a haunting discontent, shadowing though forgotten—chid him into suppression. Languor became in him a paralyzing grief. The wedding ring on one small flexed hand challenged him; he stooped pitifully—regret is more mastering even than passion—and kissed her. The blue eyes opened affrightedly; Paul Gotch saw into their pained, unresponsive depths, and something clamored about his heart. The backwash of defeated rapture bellows among the caverns of hate.

Hero saw that flash of madness in his visage, and a great pity moved her. She lifted her lips to his, pathetically, entreatingly, like an apprehensive child. He accepted the caress: her lips were

cold! The dew had fallen from the cherry, the feminine had faded into the woman.

He went back to his seat and pretended to write.

It was on the same day that Hero, passing through the hall, received from the maid Margaret, who had just taken it from the postman, a package addressed in a clerkly caligraphy. She recognized this last, and her nerves grew tense; she carried the parcel up-stairs and opened it. Among layers of cotton-wool and tissue-paper was a little silver cup. A note accompanied it.

“DEAR MRS. GOTCH,—I hope you will allow me to offer my namesake, through you, the enclosed trifle.

Trusting soon to see you again and to have the pleasure of making your husband's acquaintance,

Believe me to be,

Very truly yours,

CYRIL JEPHSON.”

She glanced mechanically at the cup; it was engraved with the fatal appellation.

For an instant Hero hesitated between anger and tears; the cool deliberation of the letter alarmed and offended her, more of the former, however, since she slipped into dejected weeping. She felt in herself, and feared to feel, a curious lassitude. Yet under her inert bewilderment



there stirred a recently-developed intelligence—Encladus-wise, prophesying doom in huge tremors, scarcely understood. She glimpsed disaster, luridly.

The cup peered up from among its wrappings like a frigid, contemptuous orb, mocking her. She saw again Paul's countenance, grief-wrung, suddenly comprehending Jephson's broadly dominant, disarmingly good-tempered. Imagination brought the two men together; the fancied juxtaposition was electrical; a flash of horrible alarm glared across her thoughts; in that chill and vivid illumination she perceived a way out. So might lightning among mountains show to the belated traveler the sullen but opportune pass.

She went to a bureau-drawer, unlocked it, withdrew a jewel-case, and lifted the tray. Beneath was a flat, parchment-bound volume, the typical bank pass-book. The balance was marked in the usual penciled figures. There were nearly sixty pounds.

Action was foreign to Hero's character, but unaccustomed qualities had been integrating themselves; she found herself strangely cool and executive. All below-stairs was still, lunch over, the tea-hour yet to come. She sought for a compact Gladstone bag and began to pack it with necessities. Seeking for some linen, she met with a pile of tiny garments; a wave of emotion rolled over her. She had remembered the child!

With the recollection came also the realization of her so trifling yet momentous folly; the child was Paul's son, and it bore the Christian name of Cyril Jephson. If her husband knew!—she horrified herself with the contingency. To petition the man Jephson for secrecy occurred to her, only to be repudiated; a blind instinct of self-respect fought with a flattering whisper that in a moment she could bend him to her will.

The child was but little to her; she confessed the fact without shame, of the kind conventionally probable; what shame she experienced was that it could *be* without her warming to it. But contemplating Paul's futile tenderness, she was almost pleased that she need not leave him utterly lacking some part of her. Mrs. Gotch would rear it; it would grow to the masculine stock, a frail scion hardened into their stern vigor. She would be best absent from the hardening process; she was herself a wildling, sensuous plant. The perception, not the simile, was Hero's.

She sat down to write to her husband; then the tears fell swift and hot—tears of mingled self-reproach and compassion, the gentler mood for him: she knew that she was doing a cruel and a foolish thing, yet knew also that she had been wronged in the beginning, and that out of that wrong had sprung both pain and folly. Not that she passed any verdict upon Paul; she sorrowed for that impetuous love which had so fruitlessly enforced her. As she fastened the envelope

a novel pang was born at her heart and stayed with her many days.

She completed her packing, secured the bag and hid it in a closet on the landing. Conceiving no other way to dispose of the silver cup, she put it in a corner of the Gladstone; her letter to Paul she laid by till she should need to use it.

These grimly coherent preparations constituted the first spontaneous exercise of her own will during more than a year; already she felt the better for them.

Elsie, inviting herself to tea, found Mrs. Gotch out, of which fact Margaret informing her younger mistress, recalled Hero from her melancholy seclusion.

The blind girl was exuberant; a wonderful hat—cardinal bows and black tips—and a cardinal blouse made her curiously modern; her perpetual cloak, a wrap in winter, a light dust-screen in summer, was drawn about her, theater-fashion, disguising her blemished shoulders. Her face was coquettish, her temper mirthful. She had several drooping purple plumes of heliotrope at her breast; their scent floated from her.

"How smart we are!" said Hero, kissing her guest; "I shall have to make up to Justine myself one of these days." A casual phrase, this last, unwittingly stumbled into, though it left her shivering.

"Justine's a dear," responded Elsie; "don't you like my flowers?"

"They are lovely!" her hostess told her; "but they are too sweet; they would make my head ache if I were to wear them." She added considerably: "They are just perfect a little distance away."

"That is the difference between you and me!" vouchsafed the other; "I like very sweet sweets and you don't, I like very sad sadnesses and you don't, I like ever-so-muchness of all sorts, betwixt-and-betweens only worry me. Shall I tell you something?"

"Do," answered Hero.

"My flowers," whispered Elsie, "are a mystery."

"That isn't very clear," answered the recipient of this vague confidence.

"I can't help it," said the blind girl; "but that's why I am so happy to-day—I could sing my head off with happiness."

Hero said no more; Elsie loved an atmosphere of bewilderment.

"Where's Baby?" inquired the wearer of the heliotrope.

"Asleep in the other room," was the reply.

"Oh!" said Elsie, disappointed but reconciled—a child's slumbers are sacred.

"You are very fond of him, Elsie?" asked Hero, abruptly.

"Of course!" The answer was almost startled. "I never knew much about babies before; it's such a beautiful feeling when you've got the dear in

your arms. Often and often since I've wished I had one of my own. Once I told Justine I did, and she said, 'Heaven, *petite*, you must not tell all the world that.' "

Hero sat down on the floor at the blind girl's side.

"If anything ever happens to me, Elsie," she began slowly, "you will go on being very fond of Baby for my sake. You are happier than Paul or Mrs. Gotch; somehow or other, it seems as if ordinary people couldn't be happy without being wicked, but you aren't ordinary."

"I'm nothing to boast about, if you ask me!" interjected Elsie; "I'm sly and cunning, and selfish and deceitful and——"

"*S-s-sh*, dear!" cried Hero; "what nonsense!"

"I am," persisted the confessee; "and what is most awful, I enjoy being all of them. When I think what I've done that Justine and Dearie don't dream about, it warms me like the hot port wine they used to give me when I was ill. You should see how I wheedle Justine to tell me stories about bad people. And when I'm alone I turn myself into those bad people and do it all over again in my head."

Hero pondered—there was indeed a note of *diablerie* in the blind girl's mobile humanity.

"But there!" decided Elsie, "I shall always love that baby of yours. He's the only thing that ever makes me ashamed of myself; if he were mine I should want him to grow up into a splen-

did man, as gentle as Dearie, but much, much more honest—as honest as Mr. Gotch, even, but happier, and as beautiful and as brave as Lohengrin: Lohengrin is nearly my ideal, but Elsa was a little fool. It's when I think what a wonderful man I should want a baby of mine to be that I am ashamed of myself. If he knew what I was like inside he'd be ashamed of his mother."

Hero's eyes were full of tragic re-consideration; she trembled at the thought of that packed Gladstone up-stairs. The crisis of her hesitation was broken by a conventional tapping; Hero replied to it.

"A gentleman to see you, ma'am," announced Margaret, and held the door wide. Cyril Jephson entered, hat off and bowing; seeing that Hero was not alone he began upon a formal sentence.

She caught at Elsie's hand and sprang up, gripping it tightly.

"Margaret," she said in a thin, high-pitched voice, so strange that all three listeners started, "you are mistaken, I am not at home to any one."

The man Jephson lost his nerve; this proud, fierce, pallid woman was no kin of little Fluffy, "improver" to the millinery. He mumbled a hasty apology and beat a retreat, escorted by the astounded Margaret. The victor remained standing, mute and rigid.

"Hero, Hero!" cried Elsie, alarmed; "Hero, darling, what is the matter?" But Hero only fell on her knees and wept. The blind girl



smoothed the curls on her friend's temples. At last the weeper quieted.

"You won't mind my not asking you to stay to tea?" Hero besought her visitor; "if I do, Paul will see what a state I'm in; if you don't, I can send him in a cup and go and lie down."

Elsie kissed her and got up promptly.

"Thank you ever so much," sobbed Hero; "I've done what's right, so don't trouble about me in the least; I shall get over it."

The blind girl hugged her tenderly and turned homewards with the wondering maid. Margaret's mistress went up-stairs and bathed her face pertinaciously.

Then she got out her check and pass-books and slipped them with some loose money into the pocket of a durable black gown, which she donned with eager speed. Soon she was creeping down the narrow flight which led to the hardly less narrow hall of the cottage. Each step creaked noisily; she felt the Gladstone bag heavy in the extreme.

A moment she paused outside the door of her husband's room; she heard him cough and move his chair—a trick he had when re-addressing himself to his work. The quiet of the place, the sun streaming through the semi-circular fan-light, the warm familiarity of the grouped doors and stairway, all impressed her regretfully—the fact surprised her.

She hurried across the chicken-yard at the rear,

fluttering its feathered folk with her flying skirts, and let herself out at the rough wooden exit; it had to be locked after her and the key pushed under.

Her direction lay not to St. Faith's, but from it. She made for the more definitely suburban road which ran along the other flank of the meadow. To the west of the cottage its northern frontier undulated markedly; the hollows concealed her from possible observation. As she traversed it she was conscious that the once repellent prospect was also not without its claim upon her regret. The sky over it was splendidly ample, the air fresh and cleanly: the diversity of the land picturesque—a certain solitude lent it distinction.

At the western border she stopped to glance back, drawn by cords she had not dreamed could be so strong. Then she called upon herself to be resolved, and, mounting a lumbering omnibus, was carried the first stage of her momentous journey. At half-past two o'clock she reached a branch bank and cashed a check for the whole of her balance. A cab bore her thence to St. James's Street, to be whirled under the bed of the river. From the Great Western she took a ticket to the Metropolis,—the less-favored route did her judgment credit. An hour to wait dragged painfully, but ended at length; the express passed through Chester in the mellow fall of the evening.

From what was she flying?—she could not, would not have told. There was that in her which, boggling at the Gordian knot, had cut it, as Alexander did.

## CHAPTER XXI

### HOPE OUT OF HELL

THIS was Hero's letter—written in a simple, almost childish hand. At the beginning it was neat, at the end it verged on the illegible.

“MY DEAR HUSBAND,

[There was a spoiled sheet on the dressing-table where she had worked—a sheet bearing these words, canceled; yet she had returned to the phrase.]

“I am going to make you very miserable, and I hate myself for it. I am going away from you, yes, and from Baby; he belongs to you most, he is not really mine. I have enough money; with Baby coming, it is a long time since I spent anything much; what you give me has quite mounted up—sixty pounds.

I am going away quite alone; but, dear, do I need to say that? If only I could have loved you I should have been the happiest girl in the world; I did not think there were any men like you. I have tried to love you; sometimes I have thought

I had got to, only for a feeling that I didn't want the things that you did. I expect it's the way I was brought up.

There is another reason for me going away. If I stopped you would learn to despise me: up to now I haven't done anything very wrong, only mean and contemptible, but I might. I wish you didn't love me, but I want you to be able to think well of me.

Don't try and find me, please; I can earn my living easily now. I know you would rather I let you look after me, but I should hate that. It will do me good to struggle a bit.

Please don't think I regret anything, especially Baby. I am a little fool for running away, but it is better for a woman to be a fool than wicked. Don't blame yourself ever about me, if I were worth it I should have been able to be happy with you. A sensible woman would give the world to have a man like you love her. Perhaps when I'm older and have worked the nonsense out of myself I'll come back to you if you will let me.

Now good-bye, dear; I do love you, somehow, that's why I'm going away to hide myself.

HERO.

P.S.—I am glad Baby has my eyes."

Paul Gotch mastered mechanically the contents of the four small pages; his brain sought to assume surprise, but his heart rejected the emotion.



Certain of the sentences fell on him as the indictment falls on the ears of the guilty. He had known all along that he was but as one who celebrates a victory in the castle-yard with the keep unwon. And now from that stern tower had poured out a desperate sortie, with shocks of doom.

He laid the sheet down (Margaret had brought it to him, finding her mistress gone and the envelope in a conspicuous place) and grappled with the imminent tragedy. So he had failed to master that proud spirit, that sullen yet persistent individuality. From its silver shield the gleam of his own passion had come back to him in a treacherous radiance, beguiling yet unwarming. The fact shouted itself into his ear; he cringed from a hideous realization; the sin of the violator was his, his its black self-indulgence, its irreparable wrong, its loathing frenzy of remorse. The idolized moments of the past avenged themselves in shivering paroxysms of reproach. The still countenance, the soft maternal contours, untouched by ecstasy, the virginal blue eyes, gentle yet enduring—he cried upon himself as Cain did. That she should need to seek in flight the isolation at which she so sadly hinted—the shame of it struck him to the earth, his cloak of pride torn from him as he fell. And still the avenging memories rolled over him, passing explosively from the positive to the negative of recollection; the poignant thrill invaded intolerably hour after



hour of the cherished past. The hoarded wine of recollection became disgustful gall.

Meanwhile intelligence analyzed automatically the essentials of the letter. A detail focused suddenly; she had gone away to hide herself, and, in doing so, warned him of her suspicion, that—somewhat, and indescribably—she loved him. Also her flight was foolish, yet she had chosen folly to wickedness. A stealing calm penetrated the thinker's wounded consciousness; it was not wholly from him that she had fled. From herself, then?—that was impossible, save by a trite figure of speech. From another? It was a fiend among thoughts; yet he entertained it, gathering illumination. Except some rival fantasy had captained Hero's wayward impulses he would have tamed them, drugged with tenderness and peace, to his own pleasure. The argument was a rack to wrench him limb from limb, but he flung himself upon it.

Balm for his bruises! How innocently she praised him—her husband! no nobler shadow fell across him; he had magnetized her spirit—it still pointed loyally to him, the needle to the pole. What other influence had biased her fate?—she feared it, whatever it was: in flying she had preferred folly to evil. Had she loved she would have stayed, being safe. Love only can protect from love—and that which masquerades as love. A bitter cry broke from his lips; she had then fled from love and a love that, leaving her ideals

faithful to their former liege, proclaimed itself love's counterfeit. The pangs of a too utter desolation laid hold upon Paul Gotch.

Nevertheless he plucked re-assurance out of them. He had prophesied rightly—the cliff or the quagmire; the choice had been made, the best road taken. He had turned her life aside to the catastrophe; she had met it with that native magnanimity which he had thought to discern in her. She had gone away quite alone—"Do I need to say that?" whispered the scarcely-dried ink. His eyes wetted, his mouth gripped at its outrushing grief, his soul sprang up, passionate, vindicating. By God! she did not need; there had been that between them which had opened the windows of her personality—her heart shrank from him, cowed by fate, mischance, the whimsical choices of the flesh, but her soul had walked with him as a friend. She should go out free, as a noble capitulant to an honorable liberty, with unstained banners free in the free air. Chivalry made him drunk with a splendid enthusiasm.

She did not regret anything, especially the child. It cleansed his palate like a draught of spring water. A wild pleasure, with a wrung, piteous mirth in it, throbbed in his veins—the emotion was half sane, wholly illogical, howbeit he hugged it delightedly. Lives sprang like weeds from the trifling amours of the mob—glasses filled a score of times with champagne and then put by for ale. His had once been

brimmed with Tokay, and now it was dashed to pieces—a worthy fate for the rarest crystal shaped by the blower's tube. He gasped in the Alpine atmosphere of tragedy.

He went to look at his son, unconsciously retaining the letter. The little one was lying awake; its pacific orbs regarded him, recognizing an intimate. There was in them no trace of that disquiet which had saddened Hero's. Otherwise the wide pupils, limpid and intensely blue, were those of his wife. The reflection provoked one of the indefinable recollections that will arrest the deepest train of thought. He raised the letter—the postscript spoke to him with sudden force: “I am glad Baby has my eyes.”

Amid a fog of incredulous surmise he groped for the esoteric significance of the words; their equation came to him, strongly, convincingly, as totals come to the lightning calculator. She loved him and did not know it!—some malign obsession held her in thrall: she could not read her own heart; notwithstanding, she copied its complex characters for him to decipher. “I am glad Baby has my eyes,”—he said it over to himself, it warmed him like a cordial.

Re-read, the letter set him girding at fate; it was so honorable, so wifely! If witchcraft were not rank superstition and a spell might be cast by an enemy upon some noble matron, in whom the bias of sorcery and an old tenderness for a dear lord should grapple for the mastery, they

might so express themselves. What was he to do?—he plumbed the depths about him.

Pursue her?—it was the easiest course, the normal, the conventional, the sane. Yet he shrank from it; it impressed him as ignoble—there was a gravely obscure adequacy about her own defense of flight; he yielded a bitter intellectual assent to her good faith. She had money, ample for her immediate needs—he might be able to get more to her without incurring the odium of pursuit; he would try to think it out.

And the future! He shied from the problem, feeling sub-consciously that at least he could endure; irony indicated to him his strong point—quiescence. A misdirected activity had brought him to this pass. In such fashion a clumsy general might defeat himself more completely than the most wily foe could hope to. How he had muddled!—exaltation sank into despair. The dusk came down upon him like the materialization of his own gloom; the child slept again, darkness flooded the clayfield, involving the white cottage somberly, thought died into inert sorrow.

When he rose it was to light the lamp in Hero's "shrine"; the yellow glow irradiated the empty chair, the table with its books, the silken throat of the work-basket, the arabesques of the screen. As he gazed the extravagance of his emotion frustrated itself; he became numb.

He began to fold the letter, looking for the discarded envelope. Finding it, he restored the

note to its receptacle and smoothed the torn flap. There were some words upon it; he made them out with difficulty. "Please"—yes, it was "please"—"don't be *very* miserable." She had turned back to write that, underlining the adverb with an impulsive dash. A moan burst to his lips—how could he obey her? was he not, indeed, most, most miserable?

Mrs. Gotch arrived at last; she had been out to tea and had stayed to argue some debatable point of social ethics. Without a word Paul gave her Hero's farewell; Selina read it, amazed.

"Really!" she cried—the harshness more of surprise than anger—"what a mad thing to do!"

"Unusual!" said her son, with equal sternness; "but not mad—honest, if you will. It would have been so easy to drift."

"But Baby," demurred Mrs. Gotch, fragmentarily; "to leave the child like that!"

"That she could so leave it," responded Paul, "is the measure of my folly—and—shame."

His voice broke; he seated himself abruptly on the couch. Selina threw off her mantle.

"She doesn't say where she is going," remarked Mrs. Gotch.

"She shall not be followed," Paul answered fiercely—the meaning rather than the observation—"she shall not be hunted down like a criminal."

"You can't let the girl go away from you in such an extraordinary manner," snapped his mother, practically.



"It is her right," insisted the other; "she thinks she does not love me."

Mrs. Gotch lifted her eyebrows.

"But she does," cried Paul; "she does—she pities me beyond the limits of pity; so love begins. Shall I turn persecutor and terrify her into hating me?"

"You must consider her reputation!" urged Selina.

"Reputation be damned!" swore Paul—lashing himself into frenzy—"it is too often the leper's cloak for me to covet it for her. I laid a mine that might have blown both our souls into the Pit; she has carried the touch-paper out of reach—she shall not be hounded for it. She says that she went away alone; she need not have said it—I would have trusted her; it is you women that can not trust one another. But I will trust her, though all the devils from hell mocked at me like apes in a circle. My God! can not a woman flee from temptation but you must chain her to it with gyves?"

Mrs. Gotch stared at him, open-mouthed; resentment flushed her thin cheeks and knitted her level brows.

Paul anticipated her protest: he dropped his arm on the padded extremity of the couch and laid his face against it. Distraction had thrust him upon tears.

His mother saw it, and hushed on the brink of passion. She sat down by him, a little troubled



at her escape from cruelty. Her son's bent shoulders heaved and the couch shook; Selina's eyes moistened sympathetically, she touched away the salt drops with her finger-tips. Her returning palm fell upon her son's; she patted it consolingly. He clasped her hand—a gesture of penitence—but did not speak. Selina Gotch bit her lips; the tears began to flow indisputably.

Mother and son sat thus for a long time; the light still gleaming in Hero's empty corner, the child slumbering in its cot hard by.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A PARADOX OF MATERNITY

HERO had taken her seat in an otherwise empty compartment; her lids were drooped, her gloved hands folded in her lap. The infernal rattle beneath, behind, and before, dulled her senses like a narcotic. Time simulated for her the changeful yet abiding present of eternity. Thus screened, the remorseless hours outran the rapid train.

The dusk grew—a swelling, purple flood, low-lying as an autumnal mist. Lights shone through it, coruscating, microscopic, solitary. A waning moon hung her sharp crescent above a wisp of gossamer cloud. Unknown shires, unknown towns, unknown villages eddied by; their breaths played momentarily upon the fugitive—now the passionate scent of maturing hay, now the mysterious odor of some dank glen, now the indefinable stimulus of blown water, now the grim exhalations of infrequent cities. She became impersonal—the sentient without the reflective.

At last the yellowing illumination of the lamp overhead conquered the external panorama, the windows turned mirrors. Hero's perceptions narrowed and sharpened.

She surveyed the compartment—its intelligent simplicity offended her; her thoughts, annihilating space, made for the accentuated familiarities of Home; it was the first occasion on which her regard of the white cottage had justified the capital letter. Nevertheless she recalled them—the thoughts—indignantly; she disciplined them with stern persistence; finally she succeeded in concentrating them, not so much upon the future as away from the past.

The physical obtruded itself after many futile attempts. Hero localized a gnawing dissatisfaction—it was appetite, grown frenzied: the force of its suddenly-considered appeal brought a sob of self-pity into her throat,—she had eaten nothing since noon. At Wolverhampton she was desperate—and defeated. The starting train drew her from the very threshold of the refreshment-room; she sat down again in the lonely compartment, biting her lip.

At Leamington her isolation ended. The intruders were a baby—uncomfortably pretentious in a stiff white hat and caped coat with fleecy trimmings—and a woman. A glance at the latter produced in Hero a haunting impulse of recognition: she groped for a clue and found it. The woman was a type—Hero had seen the type in London and marveled.

In brief, the woman and the child were anomalies—each of the other. She was ample, high-bosomed, tightly-laced; for her the smart obvi-

ously invaded the flesh—her crimped coiffure, the flat curls on her low forehead, her dazzling false teeth, her staring box-cloth ulster, all proclaimed it, and proclaimed her, too, the essential Negation of Motherhood. The baby piqued Hero's acuteness. Hunger retreating temporarily before inevitable famine, she began to study her neighbors—the large and the small.

Incontinently the child woke and cried; challenged by the roaring of the express it took up the challenge. Its guardian dandled it, petulantly and unavailingly. The infantile vision focusing Hero's friendly concern, the weeper paused to ponder her.

A pang struck the young woman—a pang ruthless, indomitable, crushing, as the knout may have descended upon patrician shoulders. She could have shrieked—to think of the child Cyril. Almost her heart stood still; with a paroxysm that brought the beaded sweat to her brow it resumed its pulsations. Involuntarily, piteously, she held out her arms to the little one opposite. It made an inchoate motion, which its custodian interpreted by passing her burden across the narrow aisle.

"If you really don't mind," she said crisply; "he's just got me wild with his carryings-on to-day, and when I'm wild I can't do the least bit of good with him. Perhaps he'll behave himself with you, he does take fancies like that."

The speaker settled herself comfortably into

her corner and began, for no apparent purpose, to take off her gloves. Hero saw that she wore, in addition to a wedding-ring, several jeweled circlets, assertively scintillating.

"Going far?" asked the other, pulling the delicate skins into shape.

"London," said Hero, touching the baby's cheeks to make it laugh.

"So am I," she was told; "it's the only place worth living in. I've been out of it a week, and I might as well have been dead. Do you live there?"

Hero answered briefly; she was getting the child to sleep. The wearer of the box-cloth ulster threw it open, revealing a somewhat soiled gown of fawn-colored material.

"You do know how to manage children," she confessed frankly; "I quite envy you. Are you married?"

"No," said Hero. The lie burned her mouth, the golden symbol on her left hand seemed to assert itself even through her glove.

"Ah!" was the indolent response; "I suppose it comes natural to some people. I always hated the idea of having them myself." The second of the three pronouns was adequate, if oblique.

"That was only until you had one of your own," suggested Hero, rocking gently.

"You wait till you're married," she was advised, with a certain suppressed mirth that had in it a singularly shrewd element. "When any

one is pleased it's the man, and that's only at first. Our fun is spoiled for years and years, but they don't care—except when it comes to standing the ex's."

"But all men are not alike," objected Hero, urged by a painful instinct of justice.

"Oh, yes, they are," was the retort; "some of them are deeper than the rest, that's all." She dismissed the subject with a grimace. "Would it be troubling you too much," she propounded, "if I had forty winks? That child kept me awake all last night."

"Not in the least," said Hero, obscurely critical of her companion's egotism; "baby seems quite settled now."

The other put up her feet, wrapping the skirt of her ulster round them.

"You know, it's awfully kind of you," she observed, with an affectation of extreme gratitude, and in another moment she was slumbering heavily.

Hero seized the opportunity to take off her own gloves and remove the tell-tale ornament from her left hand. She blushed hotly as she did so. Her purse was the only convenient hiding-place. She put the significant trifle into it with an equivocal respiration—possibly of relief, not impossibly of regret.

She fell upon contemplating the child; it was well-grown and healthy, yet, despite its ornate costume, vaguely unkempt; Hero noticed that



its garments were too tightly drawn about the short, apoplectic neck. Loosening them, she noticed that the linen so exposed was eloquently dingy. The discovery angered her. She looked at the gross, strong figure of the elder sleeper, fathoming her repellent naturalism.

Again the child awakened, but without tears. Hero talked to it, glad of the necessity—she was weary of silence. The little one was stolid—there had not been lavished upon it those ceaseless, tender evocations of intelligence which develop the mentality even of the suckling.

Hero showed it the scenic photographs that decorated the compartment; a cow in one, a dog in another, furnished her with texts for babbling speech. The wide, brown eyes shifted interestedly; the ill-balanced head followed her demonstrative finger.

"Well," said the taker of the forty winks, sitting up suddenly, "you beat all for managing a child. I should have thought you'd had half a dozen of your own, only for your being so young. I am obliged to you; I was shaping for a nice headache, but it's gone off now. You must be tired, though"—this last with unwilling politeness—"let me take him. Come to mother, Babs."

The baby shrank into Hero's bosom and wailed lustily. His mother reddened; pride covets all virtues. Cynicism saved the situation.

"Oh, very well," she remarked, and shook herself into order. Her foot had caught in a strip

of torn frilling; she dragged this latter up, ripped off a dozen inches and tossed it under the seat. The flounces thus revealed were elaborate yet untidy; typicality extended its radius.

"What part of London do you live in?" she inquired.

"I don't know yet," admitted Hero, awkwardly.

The questioner peered at her curiously.

"I see," she concluded; "you're going to friends for awhile."

"No," said Hero, reflecting that she might profit by a judiciously regulated frankness; "I have no friends, now. I have—parted from them."

"That's why you're going to London?" she was asked.

"Y-yes," said Hero.

"Ever been there before?"

"Once," owned the cross-examined.

The full, red lips pouted—a humorous, worldly-wise expression was the result.

"You've booked rooms somewhere, of course," she was informed; "we don't get in till nearly eleven."

"I—I haven't," said Hero, feeling weak; "I thought of going to the Station Hotel."

The other acknowledged the information with a curt nod, and the child dropping into a doze, offered tepidly to repossess herself of it. Hero consented, and having surrendered the nursling,

promptly sat back and fainted, from the joint effects of hunger and excitement, and an abrupt visaging of the future.

She recovered to find herself nauseated by brandy-and-water. The baby was crying determinedly, its mother knitting her brows in bewildered disgust at the complicated situation.

"Did I go off?" gasped the patient. "I'm so sorry, but I haven't eaten anything for hours, that's all—I'm not really ill."

"Poor dear," said the other, relieved; "have some biscuits; they made me bring a lot for the child."

She extracted sundry unsatisfying wafers from her hand-bag. Hero ate a handful ravenously, then set herself to still the infantile grief.

"Mayn't I know your name?" inquired the donor of the biscuits; "mine's Maitland—Phemie Maitland, short for Euphemia, which I hate."

Hero thought rapidly. "Mine is Frances Lancaster," she said, giving her mother's Christian name and fitting to it a surname not unlike her own—an alias should at least ring familiarly on the bearer's ears, if merely to avoid a suspicious inattention.

"Excuse me asking it," went on Mrs. Maitland; "but do you earn your own living?"

Miss Lancaster owned—a trifle mendaciously—that she did.

"I'm a milliner," she added. The word brought back much.

"*H'm!*" said Mrs. Maitland, with meditative patronage. "Do you know, Miss Lancaster, it's a bit risky of me, but I've been wondering if I couldn't give you a lift. My husband's a sea-captain; I've got a little flat at Bloomsbury so as not to be dull when he's away, which is nearly always. Would you like to put up with me? It would cost you less than you could do it anywhere else for. I'd make it awfully cheap for you, if you'd give me a hand sometimes with baby."

The fugitive pondered; Mrs. Phemie Maitland was the least lovely of types, but the child was reassuring. She pitied it for its stolidity, its grimy linen, its fretful weeping. The observer watched the progress of her companion's hesitancy.

"Try it for a day or two," she threw in, choosing her moment adroitly. "I've a decent little place—I'm sure you'll be comfortable. Besides, you're not fit to go to a hotel to-night; you're as white as a sheet. Let me put you up till to-morrow. I'll not charge you anything if you'll only give an eye to baby; he is *so* cross after he's been traveling."

Hero was sick of indecision: she sprang to agreement.

"Thank you," she said, wearily; "I will."

Mrs. Phemie Maitland forthwith entered upon a process of conversational pumping which drove Hero to the verge of distraction. Yet she succeeded in holding her own till they reached the great terminus in the north-west of London,

where she had a further glimpse of Madame Phemie's character, who bullied two porters with uncouth majesty while her dress-basket was being hauled out of the van and loaded upon a four-wheeler. Hero chafed indignantly, shivering to and fro upon the draughty platform with the child in her arms; later, she extracted certain coppers wherewith to appease the myrmidons of the rail. When they rumbled out of the station she had contracted a supernatural headache.

Mrs. Maitland's Bloomsbury proved to be Judd Street, that curious semi-thoroughfare which begins promisingly at Euston Road, changes its title half way down, and loses itself in the purlieus of the Foundling Hospital. Her flat was contained in a tall red-brick structure, before which the cab stopped.

"Have you any change, Miss Lancaster?" Hero was asked. She assented mechanically. "My purse is in my under-pocket," explained Mrs. Phemie, descending; "please give him two shillings."

The cabman opened a capacious mouth and nerved himself for the fray. Hero, trembling at the prospect of another altercation, paid out three of the desired coins.

Up interminable flights of stairs the women labored, the younger burdened with the child. At the last door on the topmost landing Mrs. Maitland drew out a key and gained admission. A dark little ante-chamber faced them; she groped



for matches and struck a light. Hero looked about her: it was her first entry into that peculiar product of the builder's craft, a self-contained suite.

"Come in here, Miss Lancaster," said the proprietor of the flat, and led the way into a small room with, on one side, a lean-to roof and a dormer window. In it were a cheap Indian carpet, a table, some wicker chairs with cushions, a hanging corner-cupboard, and a gas-stove with asbestos fringes. This last Mrs. Maitland set going, after igniting a single-jet chandelier that depended from the ceiling.

Hero was smitten unkindly by the fact that there were no books and no pictures, excepting, under the latter category, a few photographs on the mantel. She missed the generous fire-place of the work-room at the white cottage; she missed the serried book-shelves, the flowers, the odds and ends of pottery, the rugs, the hassocks, the huge Japanese screen, the sweeping portière, the walls crowded with objects pleasant to behold. This room was empty to the point of irritation.

Mrs. Phemie Maitland was taking off her ulster. She was a plump contradiction—art fettering nature; the effect was a hardy simplicity of outline.

"Baby will be good with you," she remarked; "I'll put the kettle on," and so disappeared into the rear of the flat. Re-appearing after an unexpectedly prolonged absence, she threw a cloth



over one end of the table, and brought in a loaf, some butter, the tea-things, and a couple of tissue-paper parcels, grease-spotted.

"I just ran out for these," she observed; "I had nothing in. Do you like sausage?—it was the only place open."

Hero shivered, but evaded the inquiry. Mrs. Maitland dabbed on to a plate some circular slices of varying colors and diameters, and then having filled the tea-pot, took the child.

"Throw your hat and jacket down there," she said, pointing to the recessed window-seat; "we will carry them in after we have had something to eat—I'm simply famishing."

Hero choked through her supper. Hungry as she was, she could not do more than nibble at the enigmatic pabulum that Phemie Maitland devoured with such gusto. The butter was strong, the tea weak, the loaf stale. The fastidious provincial suffered acutely; she escaped further torment by inquiring into the child's diet, and offering to prepare it a meal. Phemie delegated the task with joy.

"You do take to children," she said, increasingly impressed.

The infant appetite being satisfied, Phemie mooted the idea of retirement, and having extinguished the stove and the chandelier, showed her guest into the adjoining room. It was even more meagerly furnished than the other, boasting a bed, a cot, a toilet-table, a gas-stove—alight and

filling the apartment with its disagreeable odor—and Mrs. Maitland's dress-basket, which had been carried up by a lounge—for twopence—at the time of their arrival.

"I've only got one bedroom," elucidated Phemie, calmly; "you don't mind, do you?"

Hero did, but there was no manner of use in saying so. Mrs. Maitland went to shoot sundry bolts, and returning, fastened the door behind her. Quickly, almost brutally, she undressed the child and laid it in its cot. It was too tired to be fretful, and she herself sought slumber with the same self-centered indifference to Hero's proceedings that she had done in the train.

"I've put you on baby's side," she intimated; "you are so clever at managing him—you will turn the stove off when you're ready, won't you?"

Hero accepted both commissions—the tacit and the definite one. She had sat down to brush her hair; it was a sensible method of fighting the devastating headache which had gripped her. Half-an-hour elapsed; she had dozed in her chair, and roused to fancy her waking itself a dream. With wide, startled eyes she surveyed her surroundings—the bare room, the cot, the dressing-table littered with powders and perfumes, and the flat white pots of would-be beauty; she glimpsed the rolling black locks, the even complexion, the red lips of Phemie Maitland. There was a tawdry bow or two among the cheap laces at the plump throat. Hero quivered with a vague dis-

gust; an impulse of flight prompted her. Then from the cot came a low, complaining murmur. Phemie answered it with a stertorous sigh.

Hero slipped across and soothed the child. As she bent over it an hour chimed from a neighboring church—she listened for the strokes: two o'clock. A dread Unknown palisaded that tiny spot with fears. Trembling and unstrung, she lay down at length—to weep silently. Sleep was merciful; she wandered into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### SPIRITUALITY AND A MATERIAL EQUATION

"CHECKMATE," said Patrick Stuart, moving a bishop.

Paul Gotch studied the ending, then relaxed his attention.

"You should have won," commented the vicar; "but you handled your queen wrongly."

"Woman against priest," said Paul, with saturnine humor, "there might at least have been a draw."

"It does not follow," murmured the vicar; "I had a queen also."

"And I a rook," answered the other; "are we playing with pieces, Stuart, or—words?"

Patrick Stuart tried to smile. He fingered a cigar, then lit it. Paul set up a problem.

"Black to play and mate in three moves," he propounded. The vicar reflected, then pointed out the series.

"Good," said the inventor; "and yet if I were to christen these bits of box-wood 'God,' 'Death,' 'Man,' and 'The Devil,' how you would wriggle

when I cornered God and the Devil with Man and Death."

"Profanity apart," observed Patrick Stuart: "I yield you an absolute freedom of nomenclature."

"*Peccavi!*" grimaced Paul, acknowledging the covert rebuke: "but if the nomenclature had some point, Man being the featherless biped himself, Death a day-old corpse, and God and the Devil a Bible and a volume of D'Annunzio! Would you not suspend the laws of thought—that is, of chess—would you not even, a move before check-mate, sweep the board and cry 'Allah il Allah!' as Mahomet did, defying criticism with a smile, as he with the sword?"

"The laws of chess," said the vicar, "are arbitrary, the laws of thought a misleading synonym for '*processes* of thought.' You observe a process, you obey a law."

"That is as much as to say, on the theological plane, two and two do not make four."

"Do they on the mathematical?" desired Patrick Stuart; "what about plus two and minus two, which make nothing?"

Paul struck out.

"'For what man is there of you,' " he quoted bitterly, "'who, if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?' Comfort me, thou man of God—am I not in your parish? Behold, I surrender to your ecclesiastical jurisdiction; bring forth bell, book, and candle, and exorcise me. Come, now,

begin; you have a Gospel for the laity, expound it."

The vicar flicked away the ash of his cigar, and looked pityingly at the speaker.

"'Believe and thou shalt be saved'—is not that it?" said Paul, strainedly.

"From what do you wish to be saved?" he was asked.

"From the resentment of being," came the dark answer.

"The philosopher despises nothing," demurred the elder.

"He may pity," parried Paul Gotch; "a system of sentient existence which returns continually upon itself, and which provides no other reason for its being than that it exists, is at least pitiable. Resentment is the intellectual form of compassion. Philosophy aspires to prevent what humanitarianism only seeks to alleviate."

"What do you suggest?" countered Patrick Stuart; "universal suicide?"

"I suggest nothing," snapped Paul, irritably. "I find nothing in the terrestrial scheme to justify it; I ask the reason of the External. You are a disciple of the External; like Canning, you call in a new world to redress the balance of the old. Build me a golden bridge to it."

"'Philip saith unto him,' " repeated the vicar, albeit reverently, "'Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus answered and said unto



him, He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father.' ”

“I know, I know,” vouchsafed Paul despondently: “it is noble, it is mysterious, it is challenging, it is profound; even to the student of comparative religions it is *sui generis*. Was it the culminating assertion of our futile spirituality; the incandescent credulity of an ethical genius—the Shakespeare of religious thought? In other words, was that which happened in Jerusalem under Pontius Pilate part of the world-tragedy or its vindication? You take the latter view, I—wonder. Hitherto I have been content to wonder, now a contrary fate drives me over the edge of the world for comfort, as once I went for curiosity.”

He bent forward, sending the chessmen rolling here and there.

“Stuart,” he said, “you and those who think more or less with you are the only court of appeal. If you have not some right on your side the material cosmogony is a spiritual vacuum, and, as Poe has told us, the hero of the Tragedy ‘Man’ is, after all, the Conqueror Worm. You argued, I remember, that nothing was so constant as the dissatisfied heart that had hope. *I* must have hope, then—not the tinseled cherub whose name is Romance, but Hope, Hope, the not-a-sparrow-falleth Hope. You understand me; for God’s sake—if there be a God!—produce the reasons for your faith, if reasons you have. I ask you for

them, not cynically, not lightly, but as a wounded man asks for water in a desert. You have loved, you have been worsted, you have endured; if you know more than I know, speak! speak!"

He pored upon the other's countenance as if he would have penetrated to the ultimate recesses of his mind. Patrick Stuart's mouth trembled, a shadowy confession hung about his eyes. Paul Gotch withdrew his gaze.

When the vicar spoke it was in a shame-faced way.

"If there were any such scientific proof as you demand," he ventured, "may I ask if you imagine it would be either a concrete or a simple one?"

"What would it matter, so that it were proof?" fretted Paul, trifling with the chessmen.

"It matters this far," went on Patrick Stuart, "that being, of necessity, complex and diffuse, such a proof would be, for ninety-nine out of a hundred, no proof at all. The overwhelming majority of the conventionally-educated would not so much as apprehend it—though they might adopt it, nominally as a defense of, really as an adjunct to, their faith. Most of the remainder would attempt adequately to consider such a proof, and failing, might unluckily view their failure as the break-down of your argument. One man in a hundred might be helped by it."

"Take me for that man in your initial hundred," proposed Paul.

The vicar evaded the suggestion. "By condi-

tioning the general belief in the validity of the spiritual," he proceeded—"I adopt your pretentious terminology—upon the possibility of its rigidly scientific proof, you would deprive the mass of humanity of their sole moral corrective and ethical stimulus. And that, whether your scientific proof were forthcoming or not. It is as though you should forbid the entire British proletariat to eat until it had mastered the molecular theory."

"Where does this lead?" fenced Paul.

"To this," he was enlightened, "that it is necessary for the spiritual, however scientific it may be, to make a convincing appeal to some other faculty than the scientific."

Paul rose.

"And thus began," he retorted disdainfully, "superstition, hierarchies, Holy Mother Church, St. Bartholomew, Smithfield, suppression of knowledge, profitable piety, *et hoc genus omne*. Thank you, I have read too much history."

"Thus also," said the vicar, calmly, "began aspiration, self-sacrifice, pity for the poor, all the ennobling fruits of confidence in the Unseen."

"They will be evidence," Paul informed him, putting the chessmen away, "when I deny spirituality to be an enigma."

He assumed a cheerful realism and took his departure, suddenly becoming more drooping and meditative than ever. There was a new note in his bearing, a trifle of the wanly patient.

In the hall he turned, went up-stairs to the door of Elsie's private parlor and knocked.

"Come in," he was requested. He entered softly, to discover Justine reading aloud, and Elsie ensconced in an angle of the sofa, tormenting the Angora.

"Mr. Gotch!" exclaimed the blind girl, springing up before her visitor; "I'm glad it's you," she added, holding out her hand; "what is the matter with Hero?—your mother will only tell me that she has gone away for a little while, Dearie only sighs, and Justine swears she can't find out a thing. Sit down, please; it's an age since you were up here, isn't it?—not since Hero and you had tea together for the first time."

Paul met the Frenchwoman's eye, and made an appealing gesture. She nodded kindly and slipped out of the apartment. Paul led Elsie to the seat from which she had just risen. The blind girl felt the constraint of his manner and shivered.

"Don't say she's ill," he was adjured piteously.

"No," rejoined Paul, sitting down by her; he looked doubtfully at the classic white face with its swimming violet eyes.

"That's a load off my mind," she assured him, relieved; "Hero is such a lot to me, and so is Baby—is it Baby that is ill?" she added, with a quick, feverish anxiety.

"No, nor Baby either," stammered Paul;

"Elsie, tell me, has Hero been happy lately? Tell me the truth without fear."

The lustrous, strangely-tinted orbs quivered in sympathy with the delicate lips. Elsie dissented.

"N-not very," she said; "but, you know, Hero's not the sort of person to be made happy easily. That's what comes of holding yourself in so much; you get bottled up, and then happiness hurts you as much as miserableness."

"Hero talked to you a good deal," ventured Paul nervously.

"No, she doesn't," corrected Elsie, not noticing the past tense; "she can't do with talking about herself—it hurts her. No, I just feel how she works, as I do with every one."

"And how do I work?" asked Paul, half beguiled, half halting on the verge of his evil tidings.

The blind girl put her head on one side.

"Oh, you," she replied, pursing her lips; "you're bottled up, too, only you get rid of it in big words. That's why it doesn't hurt you. But Hero doesn't know any big words, and she doesn't know how to use the little ones. No more do you."

"And how can I learn?" demanded Paul, thoughtfully.

"You can't learn," he was informed; "*you* don't do it because you would be ashamed of yourself for being babyish, and you won't know how to do it till you don't mind that. Justine and

Dearie used always to be saying to me, 'Fie, for shame!' But I didn't care, and now I can always say exactly what I feel; so when I'm miserable I'm not as miserable as I should be if I couldn't, and when I'm happy I'm happier. But bother *me!*—what about Hero, when is she coming back?"

The question smote cruelly. Paul bowed himself and wrestled for control.

"I don't know," he got out, brokenly.

Elsie groped towards the sob—the instinct of compassion translating itself into that of touch—her soft hand, fragile and feminine, fell upon Paul Gotch's shoulder. Her face was dilated by an agony of suspense; it drove Paul to the merciful definition of speech.

"She has gone away from me, Elsie—alone, to live by herself," he said; "she thinks she does not love me. I have made a sad mess of her life, you see."

"How terrible!" whispered Elsie, slowly. "But you—you are fond of her, Mr. Gotch?"

The viewless eyes did not embarrass, as sighted ones would have done. Paul felt that some link of reticence snapped within him; the blind girl's "little words" sprang to his tongue.

"She was the only thing," he gasped in a storm of tearless emotion, "I ever really cared for; I would have died to make her happy."

The defeat of true love was a new phenomenon to Elsie; she regarded it with dismay. "You



poor, poor people!" she murmured, then suddenly, "How Hero must hate herself!"

"Don't say that," besought Paul; "it's too awful—I couldn't bear to know that I had first spoiled her life and then made her think herself to blame. It is my fault; I wanted to tie her to me."

"Hero has no right not to love you," snapped the blind girl, warmed by his grief, "when you love her as you do."

"I heard once, Elsie," remarked Paul, sadly, "that you had said you both liked and admired me; but that if you were married to me you would hate me in a month. Probably Hero has found me out—she has had more than a month, you know."

"I didn't," flashed the accused, tempestuously; "I said pull your hair off. And so I would, and comforted you for it after—that's how I work."

There was silence between the two for some moments. Elsie broke it.

"What will you do, Mr. Gotch?" she queried.

"Nothing," was the reply; "she wishes it. She has gone away to be free from me: how can I ask her to come back? If I would I do not know where she has gone."

"She is very cruel," asserted the blind girl.

"Not cruel," said Paul; "honest." It was the adjective he had suggested to his mother on the night of Hero's departure.

"People have no business to ruin everything

with their honesty," retorted Elsie. "I am sure she would have loved you if she had stopped; I believe you must be able to make love far better than I thought."

"But what would you do," demanded Paul, passing over the *naïve* compliment, "if you loved a person who loved you back again and all the time another person loved you too?"

"If they were every bit as nice as each other," said Elsie, defiantly coping with the dilemma, "I would love them both."

Paul sighed.

"Oh," cried the blind girl; "I think Hero ought to be ashamed of herself! And I shan't like love any more—I used to enjoy making up love-stories, but I shan't a bit now; I think love is a stupid, unsensible business when the right people don't love one another. So there!"

Paul Gotch accepted this dictum as closing the argument, and paid a melancholy adieu. Elsie followed him to the door.

"Mr. Gotch," she whispered, "has Hero taken Baby?"

"N-no," said the man under his breath. The confession crushed him.

"May I—may I come and nurse him sometimes?" continued the blind girl, eagerly.

Paul assented and went down-stairs; he was vaguely conscious that there was a glowing beauty in Elsie Stuart's face which verged upon the poignant.

He walked moodily across the brickfield. The heavy yet windless rain of late summer had fallen, with rare intervals of cessation, since daybreak. The odd panorama was assertively depressing; though, to a more elate sense, there might have been in the rich red soil, the beaded brown water, the sting of the soaked air, a promise of fertility made possible by this meteorological analogue of sorrow.

On the threshold of the cottage stood Margaret, her hand upon the knob of the open door. Over against her was an umbrella-crowned figure. Paul went up the path towards it. From behind he perceived that it wore a fawn overcoat and trousers of rough tweed—these latter turned up deeply over trim buttoned boots, splashed incongruously with spots of bright mud.

"Some one to see me, Margaret?" he asked. The figure turned; the waved auburn hair, the blond mustache, the full chin, seemed familiar. Suddenly he recollected; they were those he had seen bent over a certain libidinous print one morning on the clayfield.

"No, sir," said Margaret; "for Mrs. Gotch, sir."

"Ah! then my mother is out," concluded Paul.

"Please, sir, it's for young Mrs. Gotch," he was told apprehensively.

Paul caught a swift inhalation before it had time to become a gasp, and graduated it to the

normal. He turned with grim courtesy, driving a suspicion to the arm's length of intelligence.

"My wife is out of town," he said; "won't you come in till the rain makes its next stoppage?"

"Thanks, no; I don't think I will," stammered Mr. Jephson.

"Nonsense!" returned Paul, sharply; the accent of dominance decided Mr. Jephson, as it was intended it should. He entered the narrow hall, Margaret taking his umbrella.

Paul showed him into the work-room,—a glance had proved it to be empty. He waved the visitor to a lounge and sat down in his own chair at the round table, pushing the screen as he passed it, to hide the empty "shrine" and the little cot.

"Shocking weather, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Beastly!" said Mr. Jephson, obviously uncomfortable—the compound discomfort of incertitude, conscious moral obliquity, and the presence of a superior intellect; he added, with a gleam of diplomacy, "I shall really be glad to get back to Africa before the winter sets in."

"Going away for your health?" inquired the other, with obscure malice.

Mr. Jephson winced; the tone was irritatingly tolerant.

"Oh, no," he hastened to explain; "business—engineering; mining-stamps this time; the last it was a bridge. I've only been in England"—he had reached his conversational objective at

last—"a couple of months in the last two years."

"My wife will be sorry to have missed you," rejoined his host; "a farewell call, I presume."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Jephson, indefinitely alarmed. He fled to the jocular; "I must congratulate you," he pursued; "awfully nice to find Miss Latimer so happily settled; I always had a great respect for her."

"Very good of you, I'm sure," answered Paul, dryly; "may I ask if you are married?"

Mr. Jephson ventured a wink.

"Not got that far yet," he said; "one can't carry a wife about the world."

"No," agreed the other, with design, "and besides, it isn't necessary, eh?"

Again Mr. Jephson winked.

"Not in that climate," he said; "by the way, may I have a cigarette?—I see this is your study."

Permission was given, the inevitable offer refused, and the scent of navy-cut invaded the atmosphere. Paul's eyes devoured his guest—the large, self-satisfied mouth, the restless assertion of the head, the curious, patronizing nostril.

"Nice place you've got here," vouchsafed Mr. Jephson: "quite countryfied, you know. You're a literary man, aren't you?"

"A hack with ambitions," said Paul, falling into his natural manner. Mr. Jephson looked blank.

"You'll be regularly famous some of these

days," he declared, recovering himself; "Mrs. G. will be quite proud of you."

"An unlikely contingency," got out Paul, with a double irony.

Mr. Jephson swiveled in his seat and surveyed a tier of shelves, puffing his cigarette and observing their contents.

"You do a lot of reading, I suppose?" he pursued.

"Yes," admitted the other, stricken with painful amusement.

"*H'm!*" said Mr. Jephson; "I never did much of it; I like a smart novel, though. I always wanted to learn French, so's I could read their novels, our fellows are so awfully narrow-minded. You get all that knocked out of you in Africa. Gad! I could tell you some things you couldn't put in your books."

He arrested abruptly this flow of unwonted speech.

"By Jove!" he cried; "the rain's stopped; I'll make a bolt for a tram. Good-bye, and thanks awfully. My regards to Mrs. Gotch."

"Who shall I tell my wife——?" The inflection completed the inquiry.

"Oh, Jephson," was the confused reply—"Jephson; thanks again; I turn to the left, don't I? Thanks."

And Mr. Jephson splashed along the cinder-path. Paul went back into his room and set wide the leaf of the screen. A carbon portrait of Hero



hung above the cot, one more addition to the "shrine." Her husband looked at it with an almost expressionless gaze; a *nuance* as of bewilderment lightened his countenance. his lips moved, seeking to remember.

"The man," he murmured—"the man that stakes his spiritual all upon a hypothetical greatness in the soul of a woman—what was he to do? I forget. Speak bitterly; that was it. Oh, Hero, Hero, that I should have to fight for silence!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### INCREASE OF DEFINITION

HERO was wakened in the morning by a tapping at the outer entrance of the flat. She gathered a dubious consciousness in shock after shock of disgustful perception—then, constraining herself determinedly, put out a hand and roused her unkempt neighbor.

“Mrs. Maitland,” she said, anxiously, “some one is knocking at the —the front door.”

Phemie Maitland stirred, threw out a drowsy arm and murmured mysteriously: “It’s Edith; pop something on and let her in, there’s a dear; I’ve got such a head this morning.”

Reassured by the feminine cognomen, though irritated at her companion’s indolent presumption, Hero dressed hastily, went through to the tiny entrance hall, and unfastened the door which led therefrom to the landing. Without stood a small and intensely slatternly girl, probably of some twelve, possibly of some sixteen summers; her face and figure gave diverse warrant for either.

Marking her lack of intimacy with Hero by a

surreptitious stare, this odd little person picked up a milk-can from the threshold, walked in, and made for the rear of the flat. Hero followed, to perceive the new-comer in the act of lighting a gas cooking-stove. Taking it for granted that Edith, like the ill-fated fish of the Arabian Nights, was "in her duty," she returned to the bedroom and completed her toilet. It was significant of her natural shrewdness that she locked the Gladstone bag after using it—it had, as most of these otherwise useful articles have not, wards of a strong and unusual type. While she arranged it to close, she caught a glimpse of the silver cup that she had thrust into it on leaving, and felt that this had become, in some inexplicable fashion, hateful to her.

Finding that Mrs. Maitland still slumbered heavily, she passed out again to the kitchen, which was in shape and size an exaggerated cupboard. The slatternly girl was about filling a tea-pot, having set out on a tray, one plate—containing one round of dry toast and one pat of butter—one knife, cup, saucer, and spoon. Without a word she filled the cup, sugared it, added a dash of milk and carried the tray to Mrs. Maitland. Reappearing, the other heard her voice for the first time.

"She says," Hero was informed with an indicative jerk, "at I am to ask you if you would like a cup."

"Thank you," said Hero, "I would, please; let

me wash one for you"—this from purely interested motives. She stepped to the squalid sink and rinsed some china with elaborate thoroughness, waiving the drying process—there was no sufficiently inviting tea-towel within sight.

"You are Edith?" she inquired, while so engaged.

"Yus," owned the attendant, with the indescribable inflection of the Cockney affirmative. Hero was about to pour herself out some tea, when she recollected that the leaf quite probably had been introduced by Edith's grimy fingers in lieu of a spoon, and that the pot itself had conceivably not been cleaned for an age. She asked demurely for the caddy and made a fresh lot in one of her washed cups. Then, and not till then, could she drink. Edith contemplated her with cynical respect—Hero felt called upon to explain, mendaciously.

"I haven't to let my tea stand more than a minute," she said; "I have indigestion if I do."

"The other was just made," was the discomfiting response. Hero laughed; not so Edith, who preserved a morose gravity. The former looked at her watch. "Half-past nine!" she cried; "good gracious! what about breakfast?"

"I had mine at seving," said Edith, briefly; "Mrs. Maitland won't want none for hours."

Hero groaned in spirit; the tea had called up her thwarted appetite as the Scriptural strong man rejoicing to run his race.

"Are you hungry?" she asked confidentially.

"I'm always 'ungry," was the startling admission. A florin descended in the small, dirty palm.

"Get a shilling's worth of new-laid eggs," was the accompanying instruction, "and two slices of ham—not very thick."

Edith shambled off—she wore flaccid boots, three sizes beyond necessity. At the kitchen door she turned, eyeing Hero with absorbed attention.

Left alone, "Miss Lancaster" cleansed a pan, emptying the kettle for that purpose—there was no hot water. Then she scrubbed down a portion of the dingy "fixed" dresser and washed some more crockery. There was a cigarette-end or two in the saucer of a coffee-cup; she made a grimace as she tossed them out.

Edith arrived belatedly. "I'd a fair do to get them eggs fresh," she announced. Hero put on the ham; as it began to fill the kitchen with its tasteful aroma Edith plunged into the little hall. She returned triumphant. "Thought I'd better shut her door," was the solution of this sortie. Its maker closed that of the kitchen as she spoke.

There being no table in the latter apartment, Hero contrived—fearing wholesomely Miss Edith's native grime—to carry into the sitting-room in one tray-load all that was required for the proposed meal. After these measures of self-protection she was able to enjoy it with the des-



peration of an eighteen-hours' practical fast. Edith ate with the curb on, her palate fighting her hunger.

"You *can* cook!" she observed, pushing her chair back; "I shan't mind turning to after that. It's my day for cleaning out the flat," she supplemented.

Hero shivered and began to clear the table. While she washed the used dishes Edith bound her head in an alarmingly antique duster and swept the parlor carpet. Then, without more ado, she commenced to dust. Hero found her occupied in this futile proceeding.

"Hadn't you better wait till the dust settles?" she ventured.

"I want to get 'ome to-dy," said Edith, with oblique satire.

"Then leave it, and I'll do it," Hero told her. The criticised paused to consider.

"Oh, I'll wait," said Edith sharply, shook the duster—now removed from her inelegant coiffure—and marched into the kitchen, which she began, on her knees, to mop with a dripping cloth and no little soap. The spectator gathered up her skirts, feeling much as Falstaff did in the buck-basket. To her—as to another more famous—dirt was the primary devil. She had, perforce, to dust the immature sitting-room. As she opened the window she saw that outside was a fair August morning. Folk loitered in the street below, a 'bus rattled cheerfully from wood to asphalt, there



was a gay optimism in the air—the thrill of London's good humor; the metropolis is hugely capricious. In such moments the most detached of her units can not be lonely.

When she had finished with the small, shadowy room it was more definitely habitable than it had seemed the previous evening. Incidentally she studied the photographs on the mantel—mostly feminine, all of the ultra-theatrical type, revelatory, seductive, appealing—the appeal of the sledge-hammer.

Mrs. Maitland came in to find her weighing these phenomena of civilization. Phemie had stayed to don a trio of mechanical “curlers”—parents of those sinuous tendrils which lie like arabesques upon the forehead. The metal contrivances pointed themselves at Hero as artillery from an eminence.

“Sorry to keep you waiting so long for breakfast,” said Phemie, sweetly; “admiring my pictures? They’re all friends in the profession, on the stage, you know. My word, Edith has been busy!” she regarded her surroundings, struck by their unwonted brightness. Catching sight of a duster in Hero’s hand she shrugged her ample shoulders. “Oh!” she commented, “it’s you—I suppose you got the jumps doing nothing; it’s very nice of you, all the same. Did Edith think to give you anything to put on with?—there wasn’t much in, I’m afraid.”

"I ventured," rejoined her guest, blushing furiously, "to send out for something."

"How really sensible you are!" said Phemie, calmly, sitting down: "got any left?"

"Yes," answered Hero; "it was ham and eggs—may I cook you some?"

"Miss Lancaster," was the yawning reply, "you are simply too good for this world."

Phemie set a cushion behind her head, lit the gas-stove—despite the brilliance of the day—and stretched out her feet. In this chaste posture she awaited the arrival of her breakfast, which she disposed of ravenously.

"Well," she vouchsafed, on getting to her third cup of terrifyingly strong tea, "you see what sort of a place I have here. Mr. Maitland pays thirty bob a week for it"—which was an exaggeration of twenty-five per cent.—"suppose I ask you half-a-sovereign, and you to go halves in the house-keeping?"

Thus challenged, Hero's instincts shied as a horse from a wolf; she drew together the words of a refusal. Suddenly the wailing of the child penetrated to their ears. Hero rose automatically.

"Never mind," said Phemie; "Edith will take him." The shambling footsteps across the entrance-hall showed—albeit tardily—that Edith had decided to do so. The only outcome was a more pertinacious sobbing. Hero went to the

bedroom and gathered the weeper into her arms! It cried still, though less loudly.

"The child must be starving!" exclaimed Hero, conscience-stricken; "it's hours since it had anything; hold it"—to the amateur nurse—"while I make some food."

Again Edith's eyes set up an inquisition upon the speaker's face—black, sober, alert if childish, they incarnated apprehension rather than comprehension. Hero fed the child in the kitchen; the languid presence of Phemie was irritating to her. Its wants satisfied, the youngling proved wakeful, though quiet; it smiled amicably at its ministrant. Hero talked to it, reminding it of the pictures in the train, the dog that barked, the cow that "mooed;" it jerked its impotent limbs and babbled back meaninglessly. The woman's heart warmed to it; old habits prompted her. She stepped to the sitting-room.

"May I bathe baby, Mrs. Maitland?" she asked.

"If you like," gaped that person indifferently; "he was bathed only last Sunday, but I dare say it will amuse him."

"Sunday," reflected the astonished Hero, "and this is Thursday! Poor little thing!"

She got out the requisite paraphernalia, and soon had the child splashing and crowing in the warm water; it was usually—as has been said—stolid to exasperation, but Hero bullied it into

mirth. Edith's gaze followed her acutely. Once her thoughts filtered into speech.

"You was one of a big family!" she hazarded. Hero fathomed her, and told the necessary fib.

"How many?" pursued the inquisitress.

"Seven," said Hero, with an effort. Lies breed lies, nor are white ones less prolific than those of the darker shade. Seven seemed the smallest justification of the adjective "large."

"I'm one of twelve," continued Edith; "was yours mostly brothers or sisters?"

"About half-and-half," defined Hero, evasively; "move the bath away, there's a good girl. How soon ought you to be going—do you come for the day?"

"It's about as I like to make it," admitted the employed, candidly; "I can always say she would have me stop; I get half-a-crownd a week, so they can't do too much. Are you going to be here always now?"

Hero hesitated; one child was kicking in her lap; another, only less happily childish, stood before her. Each seemed mutely beseeching her to remain. She contemplated her sixty pounds in reserve, and answered thoughtfully: "For a while, yes; always is a very long time."

"Then," said Edith, with meditative ingenuity, "I shall tell 'em as she says I've to stop the whole dy nar; you don't mind, do you?"

She bent her knees to scan the deciding countenance; her thin hands rested upon them, her black

orbs grew wider and blacker. The elder woman shook her head pitifully, and went on drying the baby's pink skin. The earthly was drawing into focus again—her vision had been approximating to the telescopic.

Mrs. Maitland surprised them soon after this. She was ready to go out, her hair crimped wonderfully and brought over her temples, a new hat on, her ulster more staring than ever.

"I must run and see my dressmaker, dear;" she said. "You'll excuse me, won't you? Edith can look after baby."

"Certainly," rejoined Hero—it was the inevitable answer.

"And you'll make up your mind to stay?" fished Phemie; "do, dear—I should be sorry to lose you. I must get some one to help pay expenses"—this pathetically—"and baby mightn't take to any one else."

Hero glanced down at the tiny face on her bosom; Edith's eyes were beacons of suspense.

"I shall be very glad," she murmured; "for a while." Then, with an inspiration: "It depends where I can get work."

"That's all right," said Mrs. Phemie, pleased with this instalment of so convenient a victory; "and you'll need a bit to look round, won't you?—it doesn't do to be in a hurry. Good-bye for the present, then. Bye-bye, Babs!"—she waggled a plump hand at the child; "mind you do what Miss Lancaster tells you, Edith." And thus, reeking

of patchouli and flapping the heavy cloth flounce of her ulster over a pair of high-heeled boots, Mrs. Phemie Maitland sallied forth.

The next few hours passed uneventfully. "Babs" occupied Hero; Edith chattered disjointedly, yet without cessation. Profiting by Phemie's absence, Hero had all the windows and other ventilating devices of the flat brought successively into play; the "stuffy" odor of the suite, complicated by the dregs of cheap scent, was insupportable to her free nostrils.

A belated tea-lunch over, she sent the loquacious Edith home: the glib Cockney tongue was wearing in continuous operation. The baby went willingly to bed, the fatigues of the preceding day hung about its infantile brain. Quiescence fell on Hero like a shroud.

She sat by the open casement of the parlor, musing. The street noises were subdued by distance and the languor of the afternoon; behind her and on either side brooded an oppressive silence, the multiplex solitudes of superincumbent habitations.

Some profoundly perceptive intuition had corralled, in a remote corner of her consciousness, all thoughts of the immediate Past; she would not permit herself to ponder them. Yet they fumed ominously in their isolation; they reviewed themselves, since she would not. She could only avert her attention.

In despair, she sought for a book; there were



some on the top of the single tall cupboard in the bedroom. She carried to the window-seat in the parlor half-a-dozen paper-backed volumes, trashily produced, their titles in staring black capitals on the front cover. It could not honestly be said that certain of these latter startled her, rather they forbade her. She peeped into one volume, caught at a sentence, and read on. Once or twice the hand that held the thing drooped, but she did not abandon her undecided perusal. There was not a great deal of print in any of the books, and Hero was a quick reader—she passed from one to another. Meanwhile the afternoon slipped towards evening—the sky reddened, the light decreased. There were delicate shadows about the face in the dormer window; the air fluttered a stray curl on the nape of the white neck.

A noise on the distant landing roused her; she listened, but it died away. The tenant of some adjacent flat had returned; Phemie still lingered. Hero sprang up—feeling as one who has narrowly escaped detection in the commission of some crime—and restored the books to their place in the bedroom. Then she sat down once more and abandoned herself to a process of mental digestion.

She had a quick, inethical sense of humor, a controlling, though passive, interest—also inethical—in human nature, and a share of that instinctive cynicism which fathered the epigram: "Scratch a Christian and you find a savage."

Romance was to her—as it had been to Elsie—a psychological fetish. But the blind girl had loved to finger its butterfly wings; Hero, more perspicacious, saw that the idol had feet of clay. She had a ready—internal—sneer for those who, in speech or type, denied the fact. As for kissing these clayey foundations, that was another matter; yet intuition kept her from mocking the genuflecting worshiper.

Indisputably, Romance is monogamic—thus the feet of clay are overlaid with silver. The acid of Domesticity revealing the ignoble extremities, a vulgar jollity—sacro-sanct by centuries—coats them against the weather. It is this jollity that sets the judgment tripping; it amalgamates coarseness and common-sense in a chemical paradox; sub-acid to Romance, it negates the sourness of morals. Its appeal to Shakespeare is of immortal memory; on it two-fifths of the world's literature have been built.

In a Serbonian and primeval bog of doubt Hero waded to the knee. If its tepid exhalations blinded her, she had the sense to perceive that under her cautious tread the bottom sloped—into an abyss. At such a pass one can not swim—in a bog.

The chime of the parish bells came to her; drifting upon religion, her lip noted her disdain. Sheffield says of Charles the Second that he had discarded Christianity not so much by dint of reflection as of perception. It was the case with

Hero; she saw concretely that the austere basis of orthodoxy is inconsistent, not only with the conventional superstructure, but also with the facts of the struggle for existence and the concomitant appetites of the human species. The estimate demands an assiduous definition; in Hero it was pure thought, naked of words. In this form the knowledge lies at the back of the national head; ecclesiasticism blinks the fact—diplomatically.

Nevertheless, Hero groped for the delimitation between the human and the animal. Propriety did not afford it; she jibbed at that socially futile pietism which begets cant. Dumas had entrapped her sympathy without smirching it—he has a trick of euphemistic gallantry. Not so with other of his compatriots. Thus arose the problem at present before Hero—she was too proud not to fumigate her mind with an intelligent, even if scarcely conscious, question or two. They drove her towards misanthropy; a deeper cynicism than she had yet known shadowed her horizon.

One may reason largely in the confines of seconds. Hero did, disregarding the insistent past as her judgment struggled to poise itself above certain Gallic translations. It was a token of mental vigor that promised much. Indeed, more than one personal equation was involved. The odd tangle which had produced her flight from the Gotch dwelling had taken its first twist at the hands of the erotic. She had married with-

out loving. How quickly she had learned to trust, to respect, even to admire! Her husband was young, passionate, devoted. The missing link in her discarded fetters had been the physical—she had not been able to warm to the man Paul. Yet a faint spark—pity, the sense of masculine dominance, she knew not what, had rendered the man Jephson dangerous.

Many things became clearer; that introspective melancholy which had been the recoil of her husband's more ardent moods, the oddly analytical bent of his mind when it encountered the gross, his haunting dissatisfaction with the material—they suddenly ceased to irritate her. She herself grew resentful—her resentment directed itself against Nature, who had so inseparably yoked appetite and contentment. A throb of deprived companionship pained her—she felt Paul's absence.

Jephson! He flared upon the field of her mental vision as if picked out by the calcium light. She was angry with him, angry with herself—each anger fed the other. Both weakened, smitten through with compassion. He, too, was an ardent, beseeching man, a trifle foolishly so—no sin to a feminine judge. She shirked decision; once more resentment filled her mind. Two men and a woman, and neither happy, neither content! Her emotions were as fretful as Hamlet's; with her, too, the time was out of joint. It was the sum total of the position.

Her baby! Then, indeed, she wept—the cords of motherhood are very strong. In a spasm of fancy she heard it wail for her, the inarticulate clamor of a nursling, so piteous yet so enigmatic, how it beats upon the maternal ear! It was her child, the son of her body, and she had left it. She shrank, horrified, from the realization.

Yet it was not hers, she reminded herself; she had not desired it; it was the fruit of a strange cowardice, that cowardice which she had always diagnosed in herself. The maternal ceased to clutch her, but she still wept, thinking too confusedly for record. Sickening with a headache, she made some tea; being oppressed with loneliness, she picked the least terribly-titled of the translations and began to read it through.

Phemie came home before the reader had exhausted the merrily mephitic pages. She herself was full of apologies and good humor. Also, she was redolent of wine—the ripely spirituous odor of port.

## CHAPTER XXV

### LOVE, TIME, AND DEATH

THAT which had happened to the man Paul left him mentally effete; hours of a distressful leisure sundered each interval of work—he physicked them with pursuits of a more mechanical order. A square-topped table of white deal made its appearance in his room; he crowded it with working models, electrical and others, deriving frequent instalments of an odd solace from the manipulation of their miniature dynamics. One day he brought home a large refracting telescope; thereafter it reared its brazen cylinder in the bay window. Occasionally he carried it out on the clayfield to scan the northern portion of the firmament. He slept only in the small hours.

His mother interested herself in his doings—an awkward maternal condolence prompting her, her voice trembled when she addressed him. She aided him where she could—shyly, reticently, as if shunning comparison between her sapless ministry and the fresh womanhood whose departure he mourned. Yet there was that in her quivering sympathy which moved him—indescribably.



Smitten once in this fashion, he stroked a thin hand and said, without lifting his gaze from the delicate triple-expansion gear which he was studying:

"I wasn't very good to you, was I?—before Hero came—and went. Elsie says people shouldn't bottle themselves up; I am only just learning not to. Poor old dear, you have been bottled up all your life, and taught me your bad habit. Think how many kind things we might have said to each other—you and I! Instead of which our recollections are of silence—and debate."

"Actions speak louder than words," replied Mrs. Gotch, with an irrepressible dryness.

Paul smiled sadly.

"Nor need yours be ashamed of their story," he murmured, "let mine hide their heads as they may. But actions are like bricks, you may build a house with them; you can not upholster it without paste and paper. You may line a room to look like a fairy bower or a fishmonger's shop. Words are the upholstery of deeds. Did I ever tell you that I loved you?—yet I do. Once I hardly thought I did, our wills clashed so fiercely. You felt that. Could actions heal the wound? If you or I died, would it not be pleasant to remember that on such and such a day, being together, we had said—the living to the living that was now the dead, 'I love you,' and the dead to the living that now was left alone, 'I love you,

also'? It is not the lack of deeds that embitters the decent grief of upright folk, it is the unspoken word, the veiled heart."

"I should hope you didn't need telling after all I've done to show you," said his mother, stung.

"Not now," answered Paul; "because I myself have loved and suffered, and I can see. But before—is not duty your admitted watchword; were you not responsible for my existence, and, therefore, to a point, for my sins, with which you were as bound to wrestle as to provide me food? It is more to be wondered at that mother and son should love each other than husband and wife."

"It is," owned Mrs. Gotch; "but that doesn't make it right."

"Is love a thing to be earned?" asked her son, gently; "I have tried to earn it and am defeated. A man and a woman in love—if poets are to be trusted—tell one another twenty times a day that they love each other, and love all the better for the repetition. Yet there is no duty on either side, their love is free, ample, self-revealing. When duty enters—as with you and me—if love does not sometimes confess itself as love, it may die of silence, being thought by one or other not to be. I doubt if I really loved you when you did what most you imagine should command my love; when you struggled and sacrificed for me so bravely. You built me a brick room to live in and I hankered for plaster and wall-papers. For bricks one returns duty, for wall-paper love; man

is an illogical brute. Do you know why I love you now, mother of mine?"

Mrs. Gotch touched the brimming tears from her lashes; she could not speak.

"Because," said Paul, still stroking the fine, strong fingers, "because you are my mother, and desolate; because life has been bitter in your mouth, but most of all because, while my heart is breaking for a woman who is nothing to you, your heart, forgetting itself, bleeds for me. There is a language of gesture; it has told me this. And now I know that I love you, you gray, grave paradox of warm blood and cold lips. Ten minutes from now I shall be ashamed to have told you so, and you will wonder if you have dreamed it. But ten years hence there may be balm in the memory of this odd moment."

He set the model going; it throbbed steadily. Mrs. Gotch drooped her head upon her arms, and stayed so for some while. Paul brought the toy to rest and left his seat abruptly. He paused beside his mother's chair; she rose also, drying her eyes. Paul glanced at her wistfully, then moved to kiss her. She put a hand on his shoulder and he drew her to him, swayed by a strangely acute emotion. Selina Gotch hid her face; the fingers on her son's shoulder contracted in a mute significance; he put his lips impulsively to the white tresses. A sob burst from his mother's throat; she released herself and hurried from the room.

Paul walked the floor for half-an-hour, the

peripatetic habit grew upon him almost daily. Elsie arrested his meditative sentry-go; she came in, nursing the child Cyril. Beside the infantile head, as it lay on her breast, was an odorous spray of white lilac.

"Have you got any sunshine in here?" she demanded, on the threshold.

Paul looked toward the window; at one of the narrow sashes there still lingered the glory of the afternoon. He said as much to the blind girl; she went across and sat down.

"I felt it go from the other window," she told him; "it's a horrible feeling to have the sun get off you—you turn all chilly and miserable. It's like music going by outside and dying away and away and away. And suddenly it's gone, and you shiver all over your skin."

She raised the free tip of the lilac spray with a fragile finger and drew a long breath. The child was slumbering profoundly in the hollow of her arm; the sunlight irradiated her subtle countenance. She fluttered a palm fantastically.

"Dear, dear sunshine," she said; "how happy you make me! Aren't they beautiful pieces of emptiness," she adjured him—"sunshine and music and flowers? One creeps, creeps, creeps away from you, one shrivels up and smells—pah! and one goes into nothing on the last note and leaves you aching. And yet they're the loveliest things there are. Why do you suppose it is, Mr. Gotch?"

"Who can say!" answered the other, pitying her; "perhaps to beget in us an immortal hunger for the eternally beautiful, the everlastingly real."

"Do you believe in Eternity?" asked Elsie, with a reversion to her cynical directness; "isn't it just a word?"

"Scarcely," said Paul; "you see, the question is whether Eternity believes in me, not I in it. A man counts with the clock for an hour, then stops; does the clock stop? He that counted with the clock dies; does the clock falter? Stop the clock yourself; does time stop?"

Elsie shuddered.

"I know," she confessed; "I dream like that sometimes, and when I wake up I'm stiff with fright. I do dream the most hideous things. Once I thought I was putting out my arms farther and farther, feeling for the end of everything. And my hands went out and out and out, and my arms grew as thin as cotton, but I couldn't feel anything. And I screamed so loud in my sleep that it wakened the whole house, and Justine had to come and cuddle me all night."

Paul was startled by the intuitive depth of the blind girl's psychology.

"That was infinity," he said, thrown upon meditation, "and infinity is a scientific fact. It is not a mere word; it is a logical necessity. Every limit implies a beyond; infinity is the ultimate assertion of the axiom. One might say that infinity and eternity are the repeating decimals of



thought. What does the dot stand for—Deity?”

“There goes the last of the sun,” observed Elsie, “and I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean.” She folded the child into a closer embrace and got up to go. Paul did not move as she passed out of the room; he was lost in a trance-like reverie. Abruptly there sounded a tapping at the window—a tapping soft, patient, determined. The young man glanced up; a face was regarding him through pane and curtain. It was that of Allan Cary.

Paul went out hastily. The Scot was standing on the low step; he looked up, shamefaced; the other saw that there were threads of silver in the erstwhile sable beard.

The two shook hands.

“Since when,” admonished Paul, rallyingly, “have you been afraid to knock at our door?”

“Can I speak wi’ ye alone?” asked Allan Cary, ignoring the kindly quip.

“Surely,” said Paul; “come to my room.”

The Scot slipped through the passage and entered the familiar place, and, as its rightful tenant gained admission, shut the door.

“I’ve heard *she’s* aye here now,” he explained, fumbling with his hat, “an’ ’at she’s rare an’ fond o’ your wife. I ken ye’re mairriet, ye see.”

“Is that all you know, Allan?” responded the other, motioning his visitor to a seat.

“I heard,” said the Scot modestly, “’at ye had



been blessed wi' a bairn, an' 'at ye were fine and prood o't."

"And is that the full extent of your information?" pressed Paul.

"What mair should I ken?" answered the Scot; "a's weel, is't no'—ye dinna mean——?"

"Neither Death nor disease has taken toll of us," Paul reassured him; "and yet all is not at its best with me. But about yourself, Allan; I am rejoiced to see you once more; is all well with you?"

"I hae found means to live," vouchsafed Allan Cary, "tho' I hae had mair need o' means to die. When last I cam' here," he pursued grimly, "I tauld ye I had gi'en a promise I misdooted the wisdom o'."

"I remember," said Paul.

"'Twas tae sen', yince a month, a floer tae *her*," continued the dwarf, with mordant brevity; "sae undaeing a' that I socht tae dae by leavin' ye. It was to tell her I wasna deid; she asked me for some sic token."

He paused. "I hae dune as I promised," he intimated hoarsely; "an' it has juist been living fra yin floer tae the next. There's no' a blossom wi' a bonny breith 'at disna mind me o' her by noo. I've no' been oot o' the neeborhood," he added dejectedly; "I went ower the river tae a yaird there; when I could, I cam' up here for news o' the Stuarts. 'At's hoo I kent o' yer mairriage."

Again the splenetic pause that told of the diffi-

culty with which self-revelation became possible.

"But I maun end it," burst out Allan Cary, with volcanic force; "I maun gang ower seas and forget her. For a twal'month noo I hae walked wi' death and hell; it mak's ma heid dirl tae mind o't. We're a' things o' the Present, she wi' her great blind een and her ferlie face, I wi' my ill-faurt body and sair heirt. Some day a win' will blaw baith o' us intae oor graves an' oor Future will be dust an' ashes. Gin I micht yince hae had her i' ma airms!"

Paul said nothing; there was nothing to say.

"I can aye close ma een," gasped the Scot, "an' see her as plain 's I can see yerself, I can hear her saft lauchter, 'at was like naething but sound wi' a perfume o' its ain. An' while I look and listen I can feel the 'oors rinning by—oot, oot, intae Eternity, and the shadow o' Death creepin' roond tae her an' me, her an' me 'at is sae warm and leevin'. They that love are aye feart o' Time an' Death, even when they lie in each ither's airms an' hae cheated them oot o' half the victory. Shall they no curse them 'at stand alane an' dumb while Death creeps roond and Time flees awa'?"

The younger sighed deeply, wrung by his own griefs.

"Paul," said the dwarf, with shivering sincerity; "there is ae thing 'at is nearer tae a man than lo'e, and that is his reason—I canna dee i' a mad-hoose."

Paul Gotch started, horrified by the sibilant terror of the speaker.

"For a year syne," added the Scot, "I hae lived, wakin' and sleepin', wi' her in my thoughts. In the day I hae gane to an' fro, thinking o' a' the things she ever said tae me—a' her words and actions, doun tae the turn o' a head or the pittin' oot o' a finger, till it seemed as tho' she was aye at my side. At nichts we hae gane together through fearsome places 'at froze the bluid i' my veins and hung about me when I wasna sleeping. I hae ta'en the same roads nicht after nicht, and hae seen a' the deils in hell or felt them withoot seein'. I hae lost her to them, an' won her back, an' lost her again. I hae held her i' ma airms an' found her a corp—or a deil; I hae followed her up mountains as high as Heeven and found the tapmost peak as empty as a deid hand; I hae gane doun intae the bowels of the earth after her an' heard her lauchin' awa' doun afore me. And then I would come to a wall o' rock an' fling mysel' against it an' waken—alane an' i' the dark."

Neither looked at the other as the dwarf ended; at last Allan Cary spoke.

"I maun gang awa' ower-seas," he said; "ye'll wait until a month is by and then tell her that I am deid. Tell her that ye knew me, and that I was a blastit scoondrel and not fit to come near her."

"She would not believe me," rejoined Paul,

simply; "nor would I do you so great a wrong. Let me say only that you were very poor and very humble, and that you dared not hope ever to win her."

"Gin ye wull," muttered Allan Cary; "aiblins it will be kinder—to her. But dinna ye mak' her think that she couldna be mairriet. She glimpsed it yince and it frichted her. Ye'll ken to ca' me the 'fairy prince'—'twas a name she gied me. She knows nocht o' me at a'; I juist spoke tae her fra yer mither's garden, maistly aboot sangs an' sic-like—at first."

"I will remember," promised Paul.

The Scot rose. "I'll be ganging," he said; thank ye for yer kindness." He held out his hand.

"It's the last time you an' I will ever see yin anither, Paul," he murmured brokenly, seized by a sudden comprehension.

"Can you not say 'on earth'?" asked Paul, probingly.

"No," flashed the Scot; "nor any man 'at isna leein' tae himsel'. Yince I hoped for't to be true, even if we micht hae to tak' it on trust, and could again, gin I thocht 'at her spirit an' mine wad meet an' ken yin anither. But what for should I flatter mysel' wi' the shadow o' my ain pride? Gin there be a God, He has ither ends tae serve. We maun juist bide the issue. Good-bye t'ye."

"Good-bye," said Paul, feeling that all the fac-

ulties of material perception were somewhat out of focus; "let me see that the coast is clear."

He stepped towards the door. Before he could reach it it opened, and Elsie entered.

"Mr. Gotch, your mother says, will you come to your tea?"

Paul dropped precipitately into a seat.

"Y-yes," he mumbled, as though engrossed; "in a moment."

The messenger paused.

"Is some one else here?" she asked.

"No," said Paul, catching his breath. Allan Cary stood like a statue; only his eyes, that were fixed on Elsie, burned in his head like coals of fire. A moment the blind girl hesitated, as if wrestling with an instinct that puzzled her more practical senses, then turned and went away.

Allan Cary forbade sympathy with a look, and Paul piloted him silently to the gate of the white cottage.

The Scot lingered an instant, some words leaping from his tongue in a question that was fierce with pain.

"Lad, lad," he whispered; "what for should you be sae happy and me yin o' the damned!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SOME GEESE AND A BLACK SWAN

HERO had said once in a revealing sentence that if she had to be exceptionally miserable she would rather it were in London than anywhere else. Her foresight was vindicated by events; the diverse activities of the metropolis wrested her keen perceptions from the study of her own thoughts and of the Past. Injudicious as the expenditure was, she bought for the child "Babs" a neat carriage of the type known as a mail-cart; it was light, well-balanced, and had handles not too lengthy—she could manage it with ease upon an ordinarily crowded pavement. As she herself was obviously no nursemaid, its unconscious occupant was a chaperon of the first order; a fortunate thing, since Phemie seldom lacked an excuse for some solitary excursion or another, and Hero loved the open air.

By what right she had so completely taken possession of Phemie Maitland's firstborn, Hero had scarcely stayed to consider; the act was less her own than she knew. There is a vulgar shrewdness in some types of the indolently selfish; Phemie had contrived to disburden herself with



consummate art. The little one brightened swiftly under Hero's cheerful culture; Phemie saw that woman and child were growing towards the affectionate; an idea sprang up in the midst of her own boredom and untimately ripened into speech.

"Do you know, Frances, dear," she remarked tentatively, as they sat at breakfast—it was the beginning of October, a month from their first meeting—"I'm thinking of trying to get some cash together; Charlie isn't a millionaire, and I do want some decent things for this wretched show. I wonder if you would mind looking after baby in the evenings if I went back again for a bit. I'd not ask you anything for rent, then, and when Charlie puts in a few days here the house-keeper will let you have her spare room; she's not a bad sort, if you butter her a bit."

"In the evenings!" repeated Hero, perplexed by the lateness of the hours to be devoted to Mrs. Maitland's unspecified avocation.

"Oh! did I never tell you?" cried Phemie, with well-affected astonishment; "I used to be in the balcony bar at the Golconda; it wasn't bad pay, and besides, I'd broken my ankle and couldn't dance. Well, I saw one of the girls the other day, and she said the young lady that had my place was leaving. Baby is so good with you, dear, and we can't call the flat furnished with only these sticks in it."

Hero was doubtful; Phemie flounced.

"Of course, I wouldn't inconvenience you for worlds," she went on, with skilful acerbity; "but as it is, half-a-sovereign is dirt cheap, you know, dear, and there's a friend of mine who wants to room with some one nice, and she would be quite willing to pay a pound, or even more. Then I could have some one to look after Babs and do just as I wanted; I can't quite settle to idleness all at once—I do get so awfully dull."

Hero pondered the veiled threat. Phemie toasted her feet at the gas-stove.

Edith interrupted them, a figure familiar now to her mistresses, but otherwise singular. Her hands and face were amazingly clean, her apron white, her boots whole.

"Will you want any more 'ot water, 'm?" she demanded, directing herself to a sky-blue dressing-gown and certain black locks.

"No," snapped Phemie sharply. The Cockney came behind Hero and launched a rapid whisper.

"She gowin' out?" it ran.

Hero hesitated.

"Ow! get 'er orf," implored Edith; "you was to finish *Halice* to-dy."

She caught up the bacon-dish by way of cloak to this appeal, and marched off, with a malignant frown at Phemie's embryo coiffure.

"Well, dear," inquired Mrs. Maitland sweetly: "what do you think?"

"I was thinking," replied Hero, nervously,

“that it was a pity you should go back to—to \_\_\_\_\_,”

“Pickles!” Phemie adjured her; “a bar’s no worse than a shop and a jolly sight better than the stage. There’s safety in numbers. Besides, it’s only for a bit, just so I can get a few things about me. You see I’ve set my mind on it, and it’s got to come off; the point is, what are you going to do?”

Hero flushed with anger. Yet under that distasteful roof were the only friends left to her—“Babs” and the worshiping Edith. Even now the resentful Cockney was awaiting with stern impatience the fate of Lewis Carroll’s engrossing creation, as enshrined in a sixpenny edition. “Miss Lancaster” made an interim decision.

“It would be extremely awkward for me to move just at present,” she responded frigidly; “I will do my best with the child.”

Phemie smiled keenly.

“That’s a dear, sensible thing,” she said; “I’ll pop down and see the manager. Don’t be cross with me, dear,” she added, assuming a pose that was meant for petulant grace; “I really *can’t* live without something to break the monotony.”

She arrayed herself with her accustomed distinction and went out joyously.

“Thank Gawd,” remarked Edith sincerely as the door banged; “I’ve got baby’s bath all ready, miss, and when ’e’s ’ad it, you won’t mind reading some more of *Halice*, will you?”

"Babs" was bathed, fed, dandled, and set to drowse; Edith brought the thick pamphlet, in its pale green cover, and Hero took up the thread of Alice's adventures. There were only a few more pages to read, and Hero gave them with one half of her brain, the other working on a group of allied recollections. Paul had introduced her to the "Alice" books some while before Cyril had been born; he had imagined them such pleasant trifling as might suit her state of mind. So much returned with that reflection!—the perplexing equations of imminent maternity, her husband's tender solicitude, the gentle round of the quiet days, the departure of summer, the dawn of the recurrent spring, the eternal mutability of that great arch of sky which spanned the white cottage, dwarfing its generous fire-sides, its sheltered chambers, its weather-beaten walls.

Her errant fancy sought to pierce the separating Space that lay between; she wondered what Paul was doing at that instant, how he thought of her—if—if the child were well. Her heart sank; it could not, it could not, have been seriously ill, not to death—not in her absence! It was so sturdy, so alert, so lithe, so straight! Yet children did die; little clay-cold bodies clasped to unavailing bosoms, wept over by piteous eyes. She shuddered at her own grisly imaginings. One more caught her on the rebound; if anything should happen to the child it would kill Paul; widowed, bereaved, he would fail mysteriously.

She was conscious that in the man's soul there was something too finely touched to out-face such grief with spleen or with ambition.

Comfort in extremity! Paul had been a weakling, yet his mother had reared him; she was an able nurse of the body, if not of the mind; she would nurture the child infallibly. Hero felt a spasm of gratitude; it brought the tears to her lashes.

Reading almost unconsciously, she gained the conclusion of the book; Edith sighed and rose.

"Warn't he a lovely liar," was all she said. Yet sighed profoundly, doubtless that such exquisite mendacity *should* have an end.

Hero began to entertain her charge—she had bought it a large picture-book; already it had favorites among the highly-colored pages. So the hours passed until mid-day. Phemie omitting to put in an appearance, Hero lunched without her and with Edith, to that personage's huge delight.

"I orfn wonder if I am not dreaming I know you, miss," she confided; "we 'ave 'ad some fine times togever, 'aven't we, when she's been art. When you come, though, I thought I shouldn't like you—I did and no error. But there!—there was a girl onct I was fair gone on, me an' 'er was pals fust dy I seen 'er. But, Lord love you, I wouldn't go near 'er now; she was a regular cat, she was, and as sly as they make them. Likin's a queer thing, miss, aint it?"



"Very," said Hero, inattentively. Then openly, "Edith, dear, would you think me very mean if I went out this afternoon and left Babs to you? I do feel so desperate, as if I had been shut up too long."

"You've been taking it too quiet, miss," vouchsafed the astute Cockney. "Don't you worry about biby, I'll manage 'im, and if I feel lonely, I can read *Halice* to myself, now you've told me what all the big words mean. You 'urry, miss, there's quite a bit of sun."

Hero did hurry, and stepped out into the street at the termination of the repetitionary flights with a sense of relief. She had indeed been taking things too quietly; she tingled with irrepressible uneasiness which is often the prelude to hysteria.

A 'bus was jingling by—the horses noisily flat-footed upon the asphalt—she mounted it. Its destination was Picadilly Circus; the time, nearing that associated with matinées. Passing a theater, Hero saw that the last of the pit queue was just filtering in; a longing took her to see a play again. At the head of the Haymarket she got off and went down towards the historic theater. The bill was comedy; she looked at the cast, then purchased a seat and settled herself among the feminine crowd.

The play was one of the "society" order; that in which costly gowns, beautiful women, gallant gentlemen, and a detailed verisimilitude of the ultra-"smart," are the invariable, and optimism



and cynicism the variable constituents. Hero watched it demurely; she was attracted by its exotic womanhood, its melancholy, magnetic manhood, its miniature, abortive romance. Just such a sybaritish life would have been her most congruous arena. To have been born into it, emasculated of inconvenient moralities but spared the saving grace of femininity, would have met a huge percentage of her psychological needs. She could have dwelt so pleasurably in that delicate sphere, to which belong elusively-tinted furbelows, swansdown-throated opera-cloaks, dainty boots and gloves, neat-handed maids, diamonds, superb male servants, egg-shell china, and—the ideal lover! Behold him!—not young enough to be awkward or ill-tempered, not old enough to be irredeemably cynical; the finest wine of masculinity, of a comet vintage, matured in noble cellars, worthy the most acute of feminine palates. A quaver in his voice is more moving than many protestations, his courtesy is flawless, his very silence eloquent, his magnanimity heroic, his philosophy chivalrous, his victory assured. Hide yourselves and be abashed, ye other wooers; art is long and time is fleeting—this kind cometh not but by scrip and rehearsal.

Hero enjoyed her *matinée* with calmness, regaining the now lamp-lit thoroughfares with an odd start. Almost she expected to find herself in those of a city two hundred miles north and west.

There was a notable death on the contents-sheets of the evening papers; she got a copy before entering a 'bus. A tiny electric globe, set in the midst of a large white reflector, illuminated the interior of the car. She read the paper exhaustively; among the small advertisements one arrested her attention. This was it—

"H——o. Have paid further amount into N. & S. W. Bank—your branch. In pity to my self-respect make use of this, you shall not be molested in any way. P."

She looked at the lines of type. An old and familiar feeling came over her—that Paul was greater than she, that she could not escape his love or his prevision. The sentences moved her like a cry in the dark. She got out of the 'bus impulsively and hailed another. It took her to Fleet Street; she had recourse to the directory at a postal branch, and found the London office of a Liverpool daily. For this she made, wrote out an advertisement and paid for it, blushing deeply as the attendant completed the transaction. She had written a few words only—

"P——. I will if there is any need. Thank you and forgive me. H——o."

As she walked back to Judd Street her restlessness fell from her. But she could not quite have told which of the day's experiences had charmed it away.

Opening the door of the flat a babel of talk

and laughter smote her ears. She stepped into the kitchen; Edith was not there. Phemie's lazily strident voice called to her from the parlor.

"That you, Frances dear? Come in."

Hero obeyed, to find herself among a coterie of "Phemies." Short or tall, brunette or blonde, they all smacked of the type. A litter of tea-things lay about; the hot, coarse odor of rum penetrated the atmosphere; it was years since Hero had scented the remarkable mixture. She halted momentarily. In that moment she had taken stock of the rum-and-tea drinkers; also, they had taken stock of her. Their high spirits moderated, dashed by an antagonistic element.

Phemie did the honors, and Hero heard such a batch of pretentious or effusive appellations as tried her gravity. She sat down, planning a strategic retreat.

"Are you a mummer, dear?" asked her nearest neighbor, a lady with a boy's crisp alto and golden locks. Hero was horrified at the apparent cynicism of the question, as she understood it.

"Connie means are you in the profession," interpreted Phemie. "Bless you, no, dear, she's just a friend of mine, and very shy, so you mustn't bother her."

The golden-locked damsel peeped sharply over her shoulder, then shrugged it, and passed up her cup with a succinct adjuration, "Less tea this time, darling." Hero's gaze traveled covertly from countenance to countenance. All were

rouged and powdered, and impressed the beholder with a sense of something lacking—though that something certainly not cosmetic—about the eyes. Their owners all lounged like so many odalisques, and all seemed to have a *penchant* for garments that clung assertively.

Her survey completed, she was seized with sudden alarm and caught at a lack of “hot water” to obtain a temporary respite. The deficiency supplied, she went into the bedroom to take off her hat. A faint glimmer fell from the gas-bracket; by it she saw that there lay upon the bed a dark figure, slender and skirted, to the dullest vision a woman and young.

“I beg your pardon,” she said nervously.

The figure sat up.

“Who are you?” it demanded. The accent was pure, the intonation cultured.

“A—a friend of Mrs. Maitland’s,” explained Hero politely; “I’m sorry if I woke you; is your head bad?”

“Horribly,” she was told with a fierce energy; “some day when it is like this I shall cut my throat or jump out of the window. Turn up the gas, there’s a good girl, and let me put my hair straight; if my head is to ache it’ll ache, and if not, not.”

The other did as she was bidden. The sight of her neighbor startled her. On the dingy coverlet lay a graceful woman, tall and undulant, with a dark handsome face. Hero recognized

that it was not indebted for its dolorous beauty to the arts of the toilet-table.

"Hullo," said the invalid; "I couldn't see you properly before. Excuse my asking you to turn the gas up like that—I thought you were one of the crowd."

The quick discernment interested Hero; the intelligence of the proud features touched her.

"Please don't mention it," she replied simply; "wouldn't you like to bathe your forehead in cold water? I'll bring you some. And I can give you some *eau de Cologne*, if you'd care for it."

"It's awfully good of you," said the sufferer wanly; "I believe it might pick me up a bit."

Hero fetched the cool fluid in a bowl, douched it with the stimulating liquid sacred to headaches, and supplied a handkerchief. The soft white fingers used it eagerly, little sighs of pleasure marking its application. The ministrant lowered the gas.

"I say," observed the thin red lips; "who are you? I haven't seen anything like you for ages. Don't think me impertinent; you make me feel ten years younger; when I was ten years younger I was ten thousand times happier; that's why I ask."

"I'm staying with Mrs. Maitland," responded Hero; "I'm a stranger in London."

The unknown stretched out an arm and turned up the gas again.



"You're not a child or a fool!" she allowed, after a scrutiny that lasted some seconds. "How long have you been here?"

"A month or six weeks," was the answer.

"Pretty clear about Phemie by now?" came the inquiry.

Hero colored and hesitated.

"Quite so," interpreted the thin lips, curving humorously; "when are you going to get out of this?"

"I—I don't know," stammered Hero.

"Owe her any money?" she was asked; "don't look at me like that, perhaps I can help you."

"I owe Mrs. Maitland nothing," answered Hero stiffly.

"Hard up yourself then," said the unknown; "come and see me—no, don't, I'll bring you the cash, say to the 'Cabin' in Picadilly, go there for some tea."

"I have plenty of money, thank you," got out Hero, bewildered; "and I can get more or earn more if I want it."

"Then you *are* a child," flashed the rapid lips. "I suppose you think you have a chance of seeing life if you stop here. Oh, you fool, you little fool!—for you are that as well—do you want to be like Phemie and her crowd?—you've not cleverness or 'devil' enough for anything else. Look at me, I've got my foot on the ladder, and if my head doesn't kill me I may do something. I *know*—you understand me?—I *know*, and it



isn't worth it. I've had my heart broken twice and I've made the pieces and my good looks buy me chances when my wits couldn't, so I'm in a fair way to be great one of these days. I was a parson's daughter, you little fool, and I wanted to 'pluck a topmost rose from the tree of life.' I know all about that tree now, it grows with its roots in—pah! Sometimes I enjoy myself even yet, and when I've climbed the ladder and can tear the hearts out of a houseful of fools I shall enjoy myself even more. What does that prove?—that I've set myself on fire and must needs burn out. You—you little fool!—are you a parson's daughter?—you look it."

"I am not," said Hero candidly; "and I don't want in the least to be an actress."

"Then why are you here?" demanded the unknown—"here among this dirt? Yes, it's the truth, Phemie is dirt, and so is the crowd—some of it's decent dirt, but you needn't dabble in it."

The sound of the talking had awakened "Babs"—there was a faint whimper from the cot—Hero went to it and lifted the tiny complainant.

The unknown put out a tremulous palm.

"Oh," she said; "a baby—yours?"

"Phemie's," answered Hero, shrinking; "she—she isn't very fond of it, so I—I look after it, mostly. I have wanted to go away, often, but I'm afraid she'd neglect it."

The dark eyes fathomed her soul.

"Heigho!" sighed the red lips; "you're a good child, but take care of yourself, all the same."

The speaker dropped a kiss on the tiny placid brow. A hand was held out to Hero—a hand white, firm, delicate, a model for a sculptor.

"Bye-bye," she was told; "I'm glad we met. Don't be *too* philanthropic. I'm going to take that crowd off now."

She went out, shutting the door after her.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE INEFFABLE PHENOMENON

By the end of a sullen September the household at the white cottage was thrown into unwonted confusion. Mrs. Gotch acquired a severe cold, defied it—without success—and took to her bed, struck down by a sharp attack of pneumonia. Paul stood aghast at this domestic upheaval; Elsie, on the spot when medical report was made, came to the rescue.

“Send for Justine,” was her advice; “she will nurse your mother and I will nurse Baby. Justine is a wonderful nurse! I’d have been dead a dozen times over but for her.”

On which wise it fell out. The Frenchwoman arrived, neat, acute, deliberate; domesticity restored itself, and the sick-room retired to the background forthwith. For one apprehensive week Justine waged war against pulmonary inflammation, then she proceeded to conserve her victory.

As the strain lessened, Paul’s mind was gnawed increasingly by the consciousness of some duty unfulfilled. Not until Mrs. Gotch was up and

about again—the same austere figure, somewhat frail and tremulous at last—did memory condescend to indict him. It was a full month since Allan Cary's visit, and a kind, if momentous, lie was still untold.

He went in search of the blind girl; she was chattering to the child Cyril in the parlor. Common-sense abashed him suddenly; the abnormal amourette seemed more like a fantastic dream than reality. Elsie occupied a tapestry-covered lounge—the favorite seat of Selina Gotch. Paul intimated his presence, pulled up a chair, and leaned upon the tapestry arm.

"Elsie," he said, after a troubled pause, "I wonder if you could guess what I am thinking about."

"How glad you are your mother's better," answered the blind girl; "we're all too glad of that to think about anything else, aren't we, Baby dear?" And she cuddled the tiny creature enthusiastically.

"No," said Paul, "not that—exactly. And yet I was thinking about death, the saddest death of all to die, far from those who love us, those whom we love."

"Now why," exclaimed Elsie, petulantly, "you should come and try to give me the blues when I am perfectly, perfectly happy, I do not know, Mr. Gotch."

"Let me tell you why you are happy," ventured Paul; "you are happy because to-morrow, or per-

haps the next day, you are expecting something—a very little something, but precious to you, because it is to come from some one you care for very, very dearly.”

The blind girl started.

“Mr. Gotch!” she cried, in a curious species of fright.

“You see I know more than you imagined, Elsie,” pursued Paul, sadly; “what would you do if—if what you expect did not come?”

Elsie turned on him.

“Quick! quick!” she exclaimed—almost harshly; “you said you had been thinking of death. Please don’t go hinting and hinting; say it quick before I scream. What do you know about my flowers?”

Paul sighed and nerved himself.

“My poor, poor child,” he whispered; “be brave—they—will not come any more.”

The blind girl moaned—a quivering, piteous expiration—and rocked herself with her tiny burden.

“I knew him, Elsie,” said Paul slowly, addressing himself to the remainder of his odd task, “and knew him to be, in spirit, a brave and noble gentleman. You may always be proud to remember that you have been loved by such a heart as his. His life was a grievous tragedy; he blamed himself for having spoken to you, and there are those who would decide that he blamed himself justly. Yet he loved you so greatly that

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he betrayed to you the dangerous secret of his affection. To punish himself for it he went away."

"And now," gasped Elsie, in a passion of unwept tears—"now he is dead?"

Paul had to clench the hitherto implied falsehood with a direct affirmative. It hurt him, yet he knew it both wise and tender. He hastened to fence himself against other necessities of the like order.

"You won't ask me anything more, my poor Elsie," he added, "I could not answer you. It was his wish that you should know nothing of the tragedy of his life, of his name, his station, and of his death. Let him be to you nothing more than you yourself called him—a 'fairy prince.' There are many such, Elsie, strange, bright, beautiful spirits, condemned to wear the rags and fetters of an unlovely fate, and yet to think and feel above it. You were privileged to know him as even I could not do; he told me once not to mourn for him, that you loved him and had told him so; that he had had his hour. He meant that through you he had tasted the only great happiness he had ever known."

Elsie spread out her hands wildly, leaving the child on her knees.

"And now what," she said, a shrill, extravagant note in her full contralto; "where has he gone?—has he gone anywhere?—shall I go to him?—oh, Mr. Gotch," she wailed, catching the



baby to her breast and swaying in an agony of feeling; "get me to believe something or I shall go mad one of these days."

The man's heart was wrung.

"Believe," he replied, groping for both thoughts and words, "that one so true, so loyal, so generous, so strong, can not die away like the perfume of a flower; believe that he could not have been, unless behind all the towering mystery of things there were Someone to whom truth and loyalty, generosity and strength, are dear, and therefore to be guarded."

"You mean," said Elsie dryly, "you mean, believe in God. Did he?"

The other's heart sank; luckily the blind girl dispensed with a reply.

"I remember," she whispered; "the Other Heaven, the place where the best God we can think of will make our best thoughts come true. He said that."

"And what are *your* best thoughts?" prompted Paul tactfully. There leaped a tragic comfort into the sorrowful face.

"To be with *him* always"—Elsie did not mean Divinity—"and have him tell me things and sing to me."

"Cherish your best thoughts," said Paul; "believe in the best God you can imagine and—be patient. It is all that we can do."

The blind girl reflected; an intensity of consideration shadowed her face.

"Then Dearie is right," she burst out.

Paul bent his head, a trifle penitent, extremely bewildered.

"Yes," he confessed somberly; "your father is right." The admission added to his perplexity.

Elsie was no less perturbed.

"Please go away and leave me to think," she besought; "my head's all in a whirl."

Paul Gotch obeyed her; as he went he saw that the blind girl took out a little pocket-handkerchief and put it to her sightless eyes. Comprehension was returning upon her—that desolating perception which floods the heart with bitterness and overflows upon the cheeks.

He passed through into the low kitchen, glancing about for his mother. The exit to the yard was open, an east wind blew in sharply. On the threshold stood Selina Gotch, tossing sundry yellow grains to a feathered and piping throng. He sprang across, drew her in and shut the door.

"You foolish, foolish person!" he told her; "can't you find a warmer way of committing suicide?"

"Gracious!" said his mother, half offended; "mayn't I look at my own chickens?"

"By next spring, yes," retorted Paul; "I shall have to have you chained up till then."

Elsie came to the kitchen entrance.

"Mrs. Gotch," she said, "may I give you Baby? I want Mr. Gotch to take me home, if he will."

"Certainly," assented Selina, dealing with her

half of the question, "but I thought Justine and you were staying till the week-end."

"Oh, I am coming back again," promised Elsie. "I only want to talk to Dearie."

Paul got his hat and coat, Elsie prepared herself, and side by side they walked towards St. Faith's.

"Don't come in," requested the blind girl, pausing in the hall-way of the vicarage; "I need Dearie all to myself for a while. One of the maids will bring me back."

Thus dismissed, her escort returned abstractedly through the evening shadows. His mother sat by the work-room fire nursing Cyril and reading the paper; she folded the sheet and held it out to him, trepidation in her worn countenance. Paul scanned the print thus exposed; a paragraph in the agony-column shouted itself at him, punctuated by two staring capitals—P. and H. He turned sick and dropped into a chair. Selina gazed at him doubtfully, her breathing sounded curiously heavy and pronounced in the strained silence. Her son strove to speak and could not; the message set him on the rack—love, anxiety, futile imagination, wrestled within him. The issue was a kind of contentment.

"She is alive and—and well," he stammered; "that is something."

He leaned to peer at the child.

"Baby!" he murmured; "Baby!"

The veined lids lifted and the blue orbs met his.

Her son put a question to Selina Gotch.

"Do you think," he asked with a painful intonation, "when Cyril grows up, he will have any reason to blame me for his being?"

Mrs. Gotch shook her head, tearful on the instant.

"If you make a good man of him, certainly not," she said; "at least Hero could never say that she didn't respect you."

Paul winced.

"Ought a child to *be*, except as the result of love?" he demanded.

"I suppose not," owned his mother; "I loved your father, if it comes to that—are you any better off for it? Love is only a sort of liking—it may not last; babies as a rule come before you can find out."

"Not always," said Paul with swift sympathy; "I didn't for instance. Would you blot me out if you could blot out the last thirty years by doing so?"

"I mightn't do any better for myself," parried Selina Gotch with a characteristically evasive humor; "it was pretty bad while it lasted, but I've had most of my own way since. If I'd married a fool he might have stuck to me and driven me into a lunatic asylum."

Paul twisted her worn wedding-ring. "You

ought to have a big contra account with the Hereafter," he remarked.

"I'm quite satisfied to stop where I am," said his mother, and coughed pathetically.

They whiled away the evening with talk until Justine came in from shopping and Elsie from the vicarage. Over supper they were all more or less excitable, saving Justine. A sort of enforced wit seasoned the meal. Afterwards Paul sat over the fire in his room, brooding upon Hero's advertisement. He had cut it out and pasted it on a card. When he laid it in his pocket-book and returned the latter to its place a soft glow seemed to radiate from it, disturbing his heart.

In the first of the slow November dawn Justine knocked at his chamber-door, pushed it ajar, and wakened him with a sibilant calling.

"Go for the doctor, quick!" she bade him; "your mothaire is strangely ill."

The young man hurried into some garments and ran, as for his life. Justine the sane, Justine the self-possessed, could be no alarmist.

Dragged from his warm bed, the physician set out; spare, cool, fraternal, tolerant of Paul's consuming haste.

Justine met them upon the one cramped landing and caught at Paul.

"Be ver' quiet," she said, "but come—quickly!"

She drew him into the room; Selina—grown suddenly and amazingly fragile,—was propped up by pillows.

"Go to her," shaped the Frenchwoman in his ear. Paul went round, dazed by an intuition of the titanically critical. He stooped over his mother; she slipped—with a determined volition—into his embrace.

"I'm glad you've got back," she said; "I—I was waiting for you."

Her head fell heavily upon his shoulder, a broken murmur crept through her lips.

In the corner by the door Justine was whispering to the doctor.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### OUT OF THE BLUE

WITH the return of Phemie to the balcony bar at the Golconda began for Hero a period of mental incubation. She paid the minimum subscription at Mudie's—*clean* volumes are not a specialty of less august lending libraries—and resumed her reading. Between whiles she cultivated the child "Babs"; by now it could distort the more common household words, and toddle unsteadily from side to side of the parlor. Shone upon by Hero's warmer spirit it had blossomed into a cheery alertness; the stolidity faded from its tiny visage, it would frisk jollily in her arms; often she went to sleep aching from its excess of life and motion.

Edith bloomed with no less alacrity. She did her wisp of tortured hair in imitation of Hero's loose tresses, she lengthened her scant skirts, affected a maturer mold, and even wore gloves, dark and badly-fitting.

For this trio the flat itself came to exist; Phemie lay late, breakfasted and lunched in one, drifted out about four or five, and was not seen again until the earlier of the small hours. At

night she was cross, in the morning drowsy; once or twice she roused to her old indolent, good-humored self, on the occasion of such tea-parties as that which, for Hero, had synchronized with that "sicht of guid advice" from the brilliant and cynical unknown.

Hero had asked about this same piquing person, for she did not come again. Phemie had sniffed.

"She's getting to think a bit too much of herself," snapped the ingenuous Mrs. Maitland; "I remember her when she was glad enough to go on in any sort of a crowd. Of couse she *has* a good figure, and they began to dress her after a while. Then she got a few lines to speak, and to understudy a small part. She can't say she isn't lucky; her principal got typhoid, and Sallie played the part for the rest of the run. It suited her better than the other girl, that was all there was in it, but it got her on a lot. Sallie's no fool either, she knows which side her bread's buttered on."

"Sallie" was more often in Hero's mind than Phemie was given occasion to know. The clear young voice, so crisp, so disciplined, so thrilling, echoed in her memory without the most fractional diminution from the original; the dark eyes, humorous, comprehensive, discomfiting, gleamed at her out of recollection; the perfectly-balanced figure, at once ample and slender, the air of fathomless experience, conquered and ordered by cynicism, the triumphant womanhood over all,

fascinated yet frightened Hero. It was the embodiment of her secret *rapprochement* with Romance, at once its adequate, its generous exposition, and, its defeat. She felt as a buttoned foil might feel, flung down by a Toledo rapier with twenty murders on its blue blade, to ponder the ultimate significance of *carte* and *tierce*.

Hero plumbed the well of her own ardent sympathy with life, and found, as Shakespeare found, no bottom. "I think," said the Latin, "that nothing human can prove alien to me;" yet forgot, as poets will, to define his terms. What is humanity and what alienation? Mathew Arnold came near solving a problem of the same sort with his "literature is a criticism of life." But what is criticism—inane, pathetic protest? Moved by the nervous humanity of Sallie's adumbrated tragedy, Hero still resented it—*pace* the Roman, nor, with the later thinker, did she stop short at dissent. There should be a grammar of dissent; she fumbled for it.

Power in one of its aspects is resistance, but mere resistance, when it is that of mental power, is somewhat too instinctive, somewhat too lacking in intelligent self-consciousness. Hero, to all external influence, was, as has been seen, strongly, if passively resistant; slowly she began to perceive the necessity of *determinate* action upon the forces without her. Sallie became the abiding desideration of an articulate *non-con-*

formity. In other words, life became assertively inadequate.

Central London—huge, careless, wasteful, pleasure-seeking—was a Brobdignagian *ignis fatuus* floating upon a marsh of wide-spread Deprivation. Once Hero got the fen-fire glow out of focus and the vast bog in, she dropped half her egotism at the first start of her surprise. It was on a raw and gusty day—such as freezes fingers in seal muffs and feet in carriage-wraps—that she found an ancient grandsire at a corner in Oxford Street turning a marvelous combined windmill and water-wheel (with a Swiss *chalet* over all) by one wooden crank, clutched in bent and tremulous digits. She gave him some coppers and hurried on. In Russell Square there sat a neat old dame, black-gowned, white-aproned, guarding a basket of trumpery trifles, pins and spools and collar-studs. Hero stopped, clutched by pity, and endowed the stiff palm with all her remaining bronze. A dozen yards away, it came to her that both the chill recipients of her aid had been stricken in years.

The old!—it was the old that suffered, the world was to the young. “Gather ye roses while ye may”—that was Romance. How bitterly the east wind blew—with what despairing feet the day went by toward its desolate and frozen dusk! The old!—gone for them the thrill of ecstasy, when the heart beat, so blindly, so foolishly, yet so gallantly; when the pulsing tides of the world’s

eternal renaissance bore their red drops with it, and Being rounded itself into Potentiality, or drew to the renewing pleasures of Appetite. The old!—how are their friends failed, their kin departed; how is the music taken from their tardy hours, the pang of power from their shrunken limbs. Surely to them should be the murmuring fireside, the gentle word, the pervading tenderness. Alas! the world is to the young, and there are so many, many young. There is not enough of the world to go round.

Life's silver buckler swung to an angle with Hero's vision; she saw the fleshless hand and arm that held it. Oh, that refulgent disc!—whereon are the labors of Hercules, and those serried hosts with spears like blown grass, and Vulcan's stithy, and that supple, gleaming Venus—what yellow bones there are behind that splendid targe, and how they flash it in the sunlight and quiver with skeleton glee to find it so worshiped!

Upon the same evening, as Hero waited to pay a bill at a shadowy little shop, hard by the flat, a tall fellow with a straggling gray beard, bent shoulders and a tray of leaden Maxim models—such as Hero had seen on sale at the curb—was provisioning himself. A pennyworth of tea, a pennyworth of cheese, a rasher of bacon, a pennyworth of sugar; he took the tiny packages, stowed them away, and shuffled out of the shop. The assistant told her affably that it was a regular order; the gutter merchant had patronized him



for more than a year. That night Hero dreamed she had bought such pennyworths of groceries at the same little store, and hurrying home with an overpowering hunger, opened the parcels, to find them—empty.

When she went out after these trifling experiences she found herself brooding unconsciously upon the squalid aspects of the metropolis. Without reason, London seemed to have grown suddenly unprosperous. Faces evil, faces petty, faces gross, faces thwarted, faces insipid, faces cold, floated by her this way and that; faces pure or generous, or sunny, showed like stars on a cloudy night. Her mind toiled up and down the long columns of the social sum, but the space for the answer remained blank.

The child "Babs" constituted itself part of her mental anxiety. With Phemie for its guardian, what would it grow up to be? Not having itself chosen such dubitable custody, was it to be held responsible for a future which would almost inevitably be dictated by its birth and early years? As these perplexities crowded upon her she found herself remembering, half-consciously, the light which Paul's lingering, suggestive sentences had been wont to cast for her into dark places. At such times, and notably when reflecting upon the possible fate of Phemie Maitland's firstborn, she was inexpressibly glad that the youthful Cyril might look to Paul Gotch for nurture and up-bringing. She caught herself dreaming upon



her own child's possibilities; her husband was ambitious, flesh of her flesh might yet draw the world's eye. After all, maternity is maternity, and no other.

It was later than this that—taking the silver cup from her bag—she scraped the engraving into illegibility, stamped the metal flat, and, making a parcel of it, dropped it over the Embankment one dark evening, at the end of a journey taken for that purpose.

So she forged bravely through a vast sea of troublous thought. Weeks came and went and saw her wrestling with its indeterminate currents. Her soul struggled to the limits of the feminine, seeking guidance within itself and finding none. An awful loneliness fell upon her, sometimes she sat and wept.

One afternoon, being out with "Babs" and the mail-cart, she went into Regent Street to look at the photographs in a certain window. They vary constantly, reflecting the popular interests of the moment. As she stood to survey them over the shoulders of the eddying little crowd, some one spoke to her. The voice was that of Mrs. Maitland's quondam visitor, the rising "Sallie."

"Ah! how are you?" she asked quizzically; "got rid of Phemie yet, or are you still in the philanthropic mood?"

"Quite well, thank you," Hero told her, unfeignedly pleased by the meeting: "yes, I am still at the flat."

"Then this is the kiddy I saw up yonder," remarked Sallie, touching its observant brown face.

"Yes," said Hero, watching her.

"Phemie's mash not turned up again, I suppose?" continued the cynical red lips.

Hero's gaze concentrated sharply; the form of the inquiry had arrested her.

"Goes to sea, doesn't he?" pursued Sallie, leaning on her umbrella; "think *she'll* ever *see* him again, eh?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," stammered the other.

Sallie laughed.

"Why *won't* you go back to the parsonage, you darling?" she said; "it would be ever so much better for you, really."

Hero's palpable astonishment tickled the author of this recommendation; she laughed again.

"Phemie told us you were 'lost in London,' " she explained; "you didn't think she could keep a secret, did you? Now do go back, there's a sensible girl; leave Phemie to manage her own belongings and run home as quickly as ever you can. You'll be just in time to chop suet and practice 'Mortals Awake.' "

Her merriment was full, arch, and discomfitting.

"Don't be angry with me, there's a dear," she said: "I'd give the world to go back to *my* parsonage—it was a Devonshire rectory; that's why June always gives me the heart-ache. But I've

made my bed and must lie on it—you—you've only borrowed Phemie's."

She laughed once more, gave Hero a little tap with her gloved fingers, and turned away. A few yards off she looked round to nod insistently.

Hero made for the flat by Oxford Street and Southampton Row, pondering as she went. She had been nettled by the laughter which still rang in her ears; she was in the vein to sneer at it, yet did not. There had been in Sallie's mirth a maturity of knowledge which cowed her resentment. Also, some words of that highly-intelligent person—they were other than those relating to parsonages—had prompted thought.

She left the mail-cart with the housekeeper, carried the child up-stairs, let herself in with her latch-key, and went into the parlor—"Babs" on one flexed arm. From a seat at the small table Phemie greeted her entrance.

"Oh," said that person, indistinctly—for her mouth, since it must be owned, was full of corned beef, a plateful of which, with other concomitants of a meal, stood before her—"this is Miss Lancaster, Charlie. Frances, this is Mr. Maitland."

Hero stood up to a stroke of Fate's hammer that well-nigh brained her.

Just lifting his blond mustache from the depths of a coffee-cup, a cigarette in the fingers of one hand, a tolerant smile hovering about lips and mouth, was—Cyril Jephson!

Hero Gotch swayed to the blow. The child, shrinking from a stranger, put its tiny palm against Hero's cheek; it stung her like a hot iron. She could have screamed—long, wildly, insensately, as viragoes do.

Then her native strength summoned itself in a terrified rally. She moved across the room, set the child in Phemie's arms, and with that was gone, like a frightened deer, through door and ante-chamber, from landing to landing, flight by flight, into the wide street and the fresh air.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE FLOWERING OF DESPAIR

SAUL and Jonathan, sang the former's chivalric antagonist, were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths they were not divided. A tragic inversion of the famous elegy spoke in the return of that which was once Selina Gotch to its native dust. Paul dared not bury her in his father's grave.

Thereafter certain days crawled by; the man's senses rallied from the shock of that swift decease, sown at noon by the east wind in an enfeebled frame, and harvested in collapse before the dawn. Justine lingered at the white cottage, too pitiful to thrust upon the dazed mind of its master such necessity for ordered action as should make patent his desolate future.

Elsie comforted him greatly—Elsie and the child Cyril. The blind girl brought across the clayfield a thick Braille volume and hovered upon its pages. They were those of the Fourth Gospel; Elsie had surrendered to the spiritual—at discretion.

She was a quick reader, at once intelligent and

poetic; as literature, ensanguined by the vitalities of thought, the contents of the book were new to her. She passioned over it as she had been used to do over her own romances, collating its contents with the mystery that saddened them both—her pathetic absorption reproached Paul for his share in her beguilement.

“Thomas saith unto him: Lord, we know not whither thou goest,”

read Elsie, hanging over the thick leaves,

“and how can we know the way?

Jesus saith unto him: I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.

If ye had known me ye should have known my Father also, and from henceforth ye know him and have seen him.

Philip saith unto him: Lord, show us the Father and it sufficeth us.

Jesus saith unto him: Have I been so long time with you and ye have not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.”

The blind girl stopped, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. “It’s a good thing they asked Him those questions straight out,” she observed; “don’t you think so, Mr. Gotch?”

Paul assented, struck by the quaint individuality of the remark.

“Now why,” asked Elsie, reflectively; “why do I feel as if I couldn’t help believing that, why does it make me feel excited and—oh, you know how?”



Some words of another Evangelist came back to the listener—"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us by the way?" Might not all our life, he reflected, be but as a journey to Emmaus, with knowledge at the end to justify that fever of the heart, that "transcendent passion of affectionate hope."

"I dare say," vouchsafed the blind girl, closing the Gospel, "that if I'd the courage of a mouse I'd believe and chance it."

She rose, dismissing the subject. Margaret came in to light the lamps; Justine followed, dressed to go out.

"Not ready, Elsie?" she said, promptly.

"I was forgetting," apologized Elsie, making to repair the omission; "it's just Dearie's birthday, you know, Mr. Gotch, and Justine and I are going to have supper with him—it's Dearie's nicest meal, he says. Will you come?—Margaret can look after Baby."

Paul glanced at the table, eloquent of neglect.

"I musn't," he said; "if I am left alone I shall write—or try to. Give your father my best wishes, he can believe that he has them; my only friends are those that live under the shadow of St. Faith's."

The blind girl cloaked and hooded herself.

"There is so much of fog outside!" said the Frenchwoman, securing Elsie's furred wrap; "*au revoir*, Mr. Gotch—come, Elsie, my child."

She caught up her own silk skirts in the inimit-

able Gallic fashion and went off, tossing the end of a fleecy shawl about her handsome shoulders.

Paul Gotch saw them out and regained his own comfortable apartment, setting the portière to shield the sleeping Cyril from any insistent draught. He walked up and down; periodically his sentry-go brought him over against the screened corner where stood the child's cot, and, hard by, Hero's rocking-chair, her table, lamp, and wicker work-basket. Night after night since she had left him, the same soft glow had warmed it, but no one had occupied the bent-wood lounge in which she had been used to read. A few books, undisturbed, lay, as they had been left by her, in the rack under the small table. The fire danced in the hobbled grate, the gas-flames flickered occasionally on their brackets, the house was very quiet.

He tried to write and failed. Once he stepped to the window and looked out. The sea of mist, rendered impenetrable by the gloom of the clay-field, lay blankly about the deep bay.

A figure loomed suddenly through the fog, into the shining pane of the lifted blind, and knocked at the door; the imperative summons of the belated post. Margaret answered it, bringing Paul a handful of business correspondence, one with a moot address. He had to open and read this latter.

The postman paused on the threshold of the little hall; as he waited there a feminine figure

came behind him, thanked him as he moved aside, and passed into the cottage with the quick self-possession of an obvious denizen.

The dim illumination of the deserted parlor swallowed up the new-comer; Margaret brought out the disowned communication, the heavy front door of the cottage shot its noisy latch, the maid's retreating footsteps faded into the kitchen. Hero Gotch sank into a seat by the smoldering embers and listened to the thudding of her own heart.

She was vaguely conscious that there had been a lapse of time between her headlong retreat from the flat in Judd Street and her arrival in the dusky yet familiar place which now shielded her. It was good to have escaped the vaporous shroud through which her last stage had lain. The express had plunged into it at the Mersey crossing, where the thunder of the hurtling carriages betwixt the throbbing lattices high above the stealing shallows, warns the native of the short run home down the farther bank. It had not been short to Hero Gotch; they had crawled in amid a fusilade of fog-signals, with dreadful gaps of passivity in gloomy cuttings and under bridges. From the station she had been borne with extravagant caution in a damp and fretful cab. At the gate by St. Faith's she had plunged alone into the dank, interminable sea of cloud; it was as if Nature, sick to death, had donned her own grave-clothes.

And now Hero Gotch was come home again.

Growing accustomed to the semi-darkness, she recognized the peaceful outlines about her. Though the sheltered air was warm, she shivered; to be there, none witting of it save herself, it was the acme of terrifying solitude.

She dare not think of Cyril Jephson—yet she had scarcely thought of any other for five hours, each second a turn of the rack. The situation stripped her of excuse, defense, or subterfuge; she writhed in an agony of humiliating perception. *That* for her fastidious judgment! *that* for her delicate insight! *that* for her exquisite romance! *that* for the virginal self-respect which had driven her from her husband's roof! *that* for her knowledge of the world! each demonstrative was the snap of a fiendish thumb and digit. She had been cheated, gulled, befooled, smirched with the common folly of her sex—ha, ha! ho, ho! every tremor of a nerve, every pulse of a vein, was a shout of diabolical laughter in her ears. She suffered the most absolute collapse of shame.

A faint blue spark throbbed on the chandelier; she turned it up fractionally to take off her hat and jacket. Catching sight of herself in the low wide mirror, she put her hands to her hair and coaxed it mechanically into shape; travel and misery had disordered her pretty head. Her eyes shone brilliantly; excitement and suspense made her electric.

In all the thoughts of Hero Gotch there was no comfort, no guidance; a power that was not

mental had brought her back, the same power drove her to her husband. She stole into the passage and listened at his door, the sound of his steps reached her, alternately increasing and diminishing; he was striding now to, now from her, therefore alone; she trembled violently, her strength ebbed to the verge of inanition. Determinedly she moved the handle; by chance it did not whine or shriek. The door swung in, the portière covering the gap, she slipped through, closed it behind her, cowered so a moment, then, forcing herself to leave her covert, stood, a quaking figure, in the full light.

Turning with his final stride, Paul saw her and staggered. There came into his face that look of dreadful ecstasy which humanity reserves for the Supernatural. Hero froze at it, then burst into a cry.

"Please, please!" she besought him confusedly, "don't!—it's—it's me."

Paul clutched for his reason and saved it. Hero perceived the crux of the problem.

"I—I got in quietly," she stammered, "while the postman was waiting, and left my things in the parlor."

Her husband reduced incredulity to surprise. A wave of joy hurled itself against his restored sanity, then retreated.

"It was good of you to come back," he said, dispiritedly; "I did not think you would have heard so soon."



Fear seized upon Hero.

"Heard what?" she whispered; "Baby isn't— isn't——?"

"No," Paul told her; "my mother. Didn't you know?—very suddenly, of a relapse after pneumonia."

"Oh!" said Hero, with an amazement of pity.

"I thought," gasped Paul, stricken by her alarm to the earliest realization of his loss, "that was why——"

He put up his hands to his face, fighting, straining, wrestling hugely with a shattered paroxysm of masculine tears. Ashamed, he moved away, and sat down.

Drawn by living cords of tenderness, Hero crept to him. Soon one of the man's thin hands—he had thin, strong hands, like his mother's—fell slowly. Hero touched it, frightened by the convulsive opening of those springs which lie so unsuspected in some natures. At that willing contact of the soft fingers, Paul Gotch caught them up, snatched them to his lips and kissed them fiercely. The drops that bathed the delicate flesh were scalding hot.

His wife glanced away, overcome. In that moment she saw the glowing lamp in her screened corner, her chair, her books, the warm lining of her work-basket. Nothing had been changed, nothing added, save the picture of herself that hung over the cot. Perception welled into tears, she could look no longer. Elsewhere there was



novelty—a tall telescope, a deal table with models, were significant of emotional suppression. Imperceptibly she caressed the bent brown head, a tremulous pleasure thrilling her.

“I—I was wrong to go away,” she began—“silly, wicked, selfish.”

“It was I who sinned,” answered Paul, with averted face; “I—I coveted you. But you shall do what you will with me now, so you will let me see you sometimes and hear your voice. I am very desolate, Hero, I am a Gotch—the Gotches are an unlucky stock, too stern for love, too selfish not to demand it, too proud to take pity in its stead. Yet I asked your pity once, I ask it again—I am broken, I suppose.” He ran on in a miserable monologue. “Why have you come back to open my wounds? Do you know what the sight of you is to me, the touch of your fingers, the scent of your hair, the light of your eyes? You were wise to leave me—why are you returned? have I not cause enough to loathe myself?”

“I—I want to tell you,” struggled Hero, through her own grief—“why I went away.”

“I know,” interrupted Paul, wearily; “*he* came here. You were right, he would not have spared you. Such men make women weak—God knows why!”

“But you are wrong,” pleaded Hero, stricken to his feet; “I—I didn’t: I—I only thought I did.” She abandoned herself to dejection. “Oh, what

shall I do, what shall I do?" she moaned—"if I could have told you myself!"

The man roused to comfort her as she had sought to comfort him.

"Why should I judge you?" he asked her; "I loved you when I first saw you. Love comes by no will of ours; it can not be given or earned."

"It can! it can!" cried Hero hysterically; "I know it can!"

"A kind delusion," said her husband; "no, do not try to make yourself love me; if you have any power over such things, make me cease to love you, so that I may be content to keep you as a dear friend, a sister, a comrade. Can you teach me that; can you take memory from my days, thought from my nights, desire out of my heart?"

He clasped her hands in his.

"How cold you are!" he broke off; "come to the fire." He lifted a chair, relinquished it suddenly, stretched out an arm to the bent-wood rocker by the screen, and brought it to the fender. One of the projecting curves entangled with the supports of the cot and jarred them; the child woke and wailed.

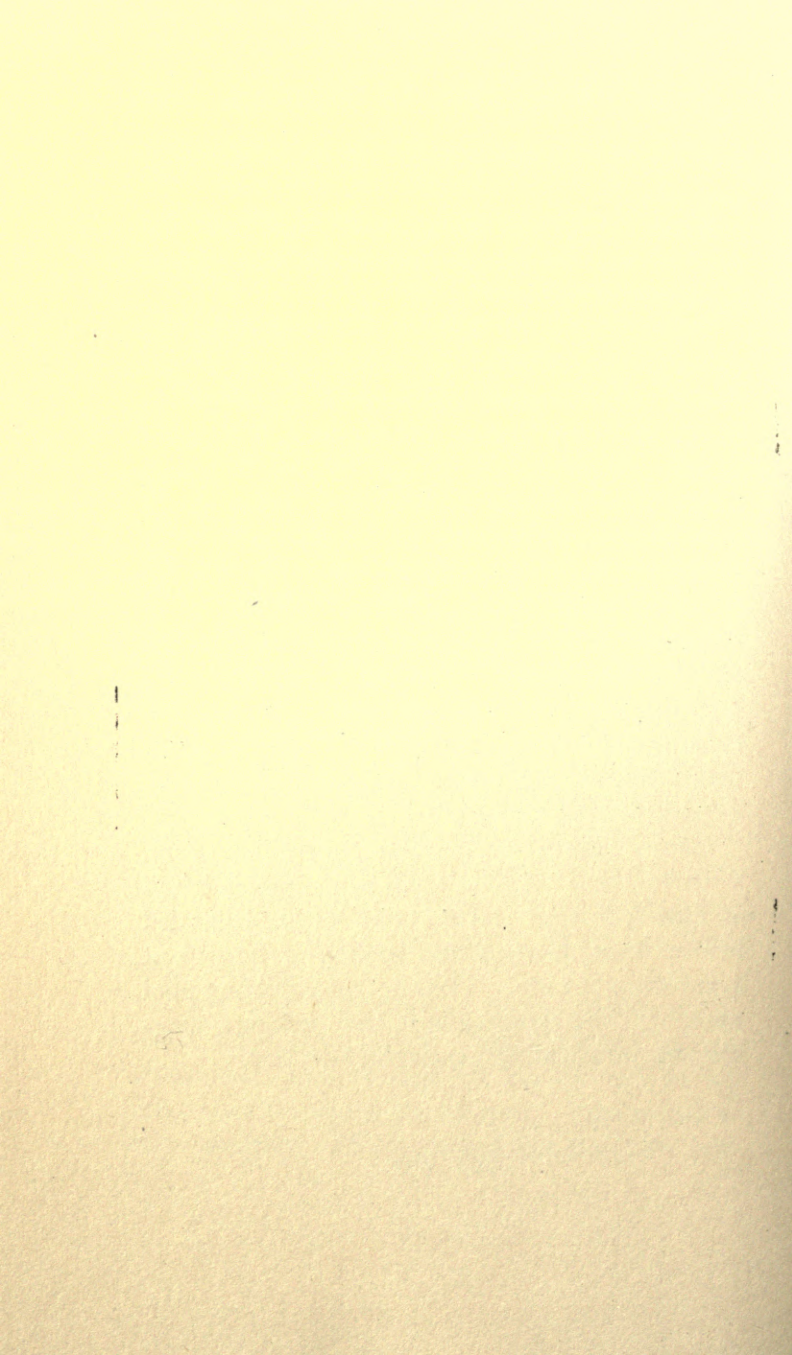
Hero went and gathered it up—slowly, nervously, tense with pathos. She sat down in her accustomed seat, raising her burden to kiss it; the tears streamed at the gesture. Paul watched her insatiably. Hero soothed her tiny son, put

him back among his pillows, and stood brooding over him.

Then it was that her husband drew near and spoke to her, quiveringly, as one that acts against his better judgment.

"Hero," he said; "tell me, if I were to be less gloomy, less critical, less contemptuous of the world, less impossible a companion of your bright youth; if I were humble and obedient, if I taught myself joyousness as a child studies a lesson, would it be madness to hope that, some day, a little tenderness towards me might warm your spirit, and that you would tell me of it? Do not be too sanguine, too considerate, too fearful of the truth; if you doubt too greatly, be merciful and bid me despair. The night you left me I was mad with pain; I stilled it with a lie, that you loved me and did not know it. I will not nurse that falsehood any longer; give me, if you can, a spark of hope instead."

Hero raised her eyes—lucent, appealing, azure, wet with recent sorrow, fresh and sweet and frail as blue-bells after storm. Her husband dazzled before them, incredulous; something tugged at every strand of life. Then he laid trembling hold upon her; she clung against him, seeking—magnificent, intoxicating generosity!—a kiss.













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